K3145 * $1.75 * A BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOK

Caroline

Could an impetuous mistress become a cherished wife?

Jane Morgan

Dearest Caroline

Had Caroline been born with status, her search for a wealthy suitor would not have been necessary. But she was poor—poor, beautiful, and impetuous. And Caroline was not about to settle for kitchen work for a few pence a day. Her future, she stubbornly believed, lay in becoming a consort to a man of position.

But then she met Geoffry, and her entire life changed. For Geoffry, though he loved her, sought more than the surface beauty of a mistress. He sought a lady. Humiliated by his accusations about her past, Caroline left London and Geoffry and set out to become that lady. But even after she had become a young woman of culture, could she ever truly escape her past?

Not All What She Expected

"I am waiting for an answer, Caroline." The soft voice had lost none of its even politeness.

Caroline raised slightly mocking eyes and said flatly, "Yes."

His lips were on hers almost before the word was out, and Caroline made a startling discovery. The punctilious, reserved Mr. Price was not such a stuffed shirt as he appeared. He kissed her with an agressive sexuality that was the last thing she would have expected of him. Her pulses were pounding by the time he released her, and her cheeks were aflame...

Caroline

Jane Morgan

A BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOK
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I

According to the neighbors, it was an unprecedented occurrence. Of course, everybody knew she was being kept by the dapper old gentleman with the dyed whiskers, but he wasn't a bad sort, and she was such an agreeable girl—pretty and friendly and cheerful as a bird. However, to judge by the noise coming from the second floor, Caroline had a temper as well.

What, the neighbors wondered, could all the ruckus be about? George Spencer, the ostler's boy, had been there when the old fellow came to call. There was no harm in George, he was just a lad, but then, you never could tell. The fact was that there was a storm going on up there in Caroline's rooms—shouts and curses and stampings and crashings.

Speculation was rife among the assembled neighbors as to who was on the wrong end of the argument. They began to lay modest bets: sixpence to nine George would be tossed out on his ear; a shilling, even odds, it would be the old gaffer. A hush fell for a few minutes as everyone listened hard, trying to get a clue from the indistinct sounds. The noisiest voice was, appropriately, Caroline's, but it was impossible to tell what she was saying. A low rumble represented the oldster, and there was an occasional squawk from George. " 'Ere now!" he was heard to protest several times; it was a measure of his perturbation that his aitches, of which he was rather proud, had deserted him.

All at once the suspense ended. The door upstairs opened, and the old geezer remarked audibly, "I'll have

no more to say to you, miss. You'll receive a bank draft to cover your expenses till the end of the month, and that'll be the last of you so far as I'm concerned. You needn't think to impose upon my good nature when you're destitute!"

A derisive laugh was the only response to this gibe, and the old fellow descended the stairs with some dispatch. He was hatless and disheveled. He blustered a little at the group in the street, frowning uncomprehendingly as, amidst general laughter, Jack collected his shilling and Mrs. B. forfeited her sixpence.

But the scene was not quite over. An angelic vision of pink and white and golden curls appeared at the window, yelling, "You forgot this!"

A neat black silk hat tumbled down. As the discomposed old gentleman stooped to pick it up, he narrowly escaped being clouted by his ivory-handled walking stick, which plummeted to the pavement accompanied by another shout.

"And this!"

A gorgeous imitation silk Chinese dressing gown sailed out, caught in the wind, and floated drunkenly into the middle of the cobbled lane.

"And these!"

A brush and one slipper landed in a puddle. The second slipper bounced off the head of a little boy who set up a wail until he realized that everyone else was laughing. Then he laughed, too.

By this time the poor old fellow was hurrying away from the rowdy scene as fast as he could go, so he was well out of range when the last missile hurtled through the air at deadly speed. It was a vase of flowers, very pretty red roses in a blue-and-white vase that smashed with an eminently satisfactory noise and seemed finally to mollify Caroline. She leaned out over the windowsill, surveying

the battlefield with complaisance and fluffing her golden curls.

A thought struck her and she called down, "If you'll gather them flowers up for me, Mrs. B., I'll let you have half. It's a shame to waste good roses—who knows when I shall get more?" She laughed, a light, airy sound, and then she disappeared.

Inside her sitting room, Caroline stopped laughing. "Well, at least it was only the Delft vase, and not the Sèvres or the Chinese one," she remarked.

George gazed disconsolately at the carpet. "I am sorry about all this, Carrie. Really I am."

Sitting down with a flounce on the sofa beside him, Caroline did not appear to be much concerned. "Well, I daresay it may be a little inconvenient after a bit, but I'll tell you, George, I was getting sick of him anyway, with his nasty suspicions. And the way he abused you—it was intolerable, quite intolerable. I shan't let him dictate who I may have for friends and who not. If he had his way, I'd not know a soul but a few totty-headed women and a couple of leering windbags ten years older than he is himself, which is far old enough." Caroline leaned back on the shabby sofa. She put one foot on George's knee and crossed her ankles. "What I want to know," she said with a sigh, "is where are all those delightful silly men one reads about in books? The ones who squander vast fortunes on their mistresses and are such fools they never notice the mistresses are having torrid affairs with handsome young footmen."

"Perhaps I could make do as a footman," grinned George.

Caroline laughed. "If I ever find a rich fool, perhaps I'll take you on."

They were still in their relaxed posture, recapitulating the battle, when a knock came at the door. The person who

came dashing in at Caroline's nonchalant "Door's open" was a young man who bore a remarkable resemblance to George, although he was somewhat less of an age and his hair was carrot-colored.

"So you've got rid of him at last!" exulted the newcomer, who answered to the name of Tom. "Goodbye, Warby—fusty old spoilsport! You was always chasing us out when he came round, Carrie. *I* hated him!"

With this pronouncement, Tommy began to forage in the cannisters on the table at the back of the room and came up with a large slab of bread liberally spread with jam. "Big to-do downstairs," he reported smugly, with his mouth full. "Mrs. B.'s scrambling after the roses, and they're having a grand gossip, let me tell you. Josh Wiggin's gone off with that ray-diculous dressing gown to the secondhand shop in Puddle Dock."

Tommy flopped down in a chair and stretched out his multijointed legs. Caroline reached over to take a bite of his bread and jam.

"It's not such a ridiculous dressing gown," she pointed out. "If Josh don't get two or three quid for it, he'll have been took proper. It's probably worth ten."

"Ten quid!" cried George in tones of strong disapproval. "And you threw it out the window?"

"Why didn't you throw it at me, that's what I'd like to know," put in Tommy, and thereby earned a look of disgust from his brother.

"What'll you do for the ready, Carrie, when what the Colonel sends you runs out?" George fretted. "If he does send you anything, which I have my doubts about. You ain't in no case to be throwing ten quid out the window!"

"I don't care," retorted Caroline. She took her feet off George's knee with a rustle of petticoats and sat up straight. "I couldn't bear to have the beastly thing about me. Besides," she grinned, tickling George's sprouting of

side-whiskers, "I'm going to find a flash cully to keep me in style, with footmen, remember?"

George refused to smile. "Dammit, Carrie, you needn't find another spark straight off. Why don't you do something else?"

"You're right on one count, Georgie; I don't need another one for a bit. Warby's left me plump enough in the pocket so I ain't obliged to take on the first comer. So far I've had to please a young nob in bad health and an old gaffer in fair health. This time, by God, I'm going to find a man who pleases me!" She looked very self-satisfied, then she lifted her hands palm upward and let them drop. "What that will be exactly, I don't know yet. But it will be young, handsome, and strong." George opened his mouth. "And rich." George closed his mouth. "And you may be sure, my dear Mr. Spencer, I ain't going to surrender myself to some sober-minded employer who'll take me in to cook in his kitchen or serve ale to his ill-smelling customers for a few pence a week plus whatever I may be able to earn in the hay in my off-hours. Better to concentrate on the sideline and make a decent show of it!"

Caroline tossed her curls. The soft curve of her lips revealed even little teeth; her bright blue eyes sparkled in a way that made the hearts of both boys beat faster.

"Well," said Tommy with a shrug, "you're a looker, that's for sure."

Caroline laughed and bobbed a curtsey. "The first thing I'll need is—guess!" She twirled around the middle of the room with her head thrown back, a look of blissful anticipation on her face.

"A new bloody dress," suggested George, entirely out of humor.

"How clever you are, darling boy. That's it exactly—a new bloody dress. Will you come with me to choose the

stuff, or will your dad be concerned for your virtue?''

George recovered his equanimity and grinned. ''He knows we ain't got no such luck, damn us all. Come on, Tom, we're going to catch it if the mail's got in and we ain't on hand.''

''It's always such a damn lot of work, the mail,'' grumbled Tommy. ''And never a prime bit o' blood. I never seen such a roarer as was that grey yesterday—don't you wonder, Georgie, if it wouldn't pay 'em to keep the cattle in better cue? I suppose any horse would break down under the sort of thing they're expected to take in stride, but the post horses, you know. . . .'' Tommy was off on his favorite subject, and there was no stopping him.

Caroline went downstairs with them. She collected her roses and the fragments of Delft ware, which she removed upstairs to put in the bottom of a future flowerbox for drainage.

Progressing cheerfully down the street a few minutes later, she reflected that if there was one thing more fun than getting rid of a bore, then getting a new dress must be it. And of all places, London was surely the most delightful in the world to shop in. In point of fact, Caroline had never been anywhere in the world besides London, except Birmingham, and it was to be expected that of the two Birmingham would suffer by comparison. But notwithstanding her inexperience, Caroline was sure that neither Paris nor Constantinople could hold a candle to London. Caroline liked London. On a day like today, she liked everything. As she emerged from a tangle of narrow streets onto Ludgate Hill, she skirted St. Paul's to the north, climbed the steps into Paternoster Row to look in the windows of the bookshops, then she sauntered down Cheapside, brown skirts swinging, golden curls bobbing under the full poke of her twice-refurbished bonnet. In tossing the Colonel's dressing gown out the window, she

had expended well over her day's ration of extravagance, and was resolved to drive a hard bargain. Although a new dress might seem like something of a luxury, in reality it was a tool. Sanguine as she might be, Caroline knew that she would soon run through the little money she had laboriously managed to put by. She, like George, had little faith in the Colonel's promise of funds. It would be necessary for her to find another man to foot the bills, and she could hardly hope to snag a satisfactory fellow without the proper accoutrements. A new dress, stylish, flattering, and looking a good deal more expensive than it would actually be, was just what was needed.

Caroline gazed about her as she walked, critically eying respectably dressed ladies for ideas. There was nobody elegant in Cheapside, and she resolved to slip over to Westminster for a refreshing and instructive stroll in St. James' Park as soon as she had acquired her fabric. For Caroline, buying a new dress meant investing in the required six or seven yards of material, then sitting down for three or four days with a needle and thread, a good pair of scissors, and whatever buttons and trimmings she could buy, borrow, or snip off old dresses and re-use. Every once in a while she wondered what it would be like, when one wanted a dress, to send round to a modiste who would promptly appear with a fairy-tale collection of samples—shining silks and sumptuous velvets, Indian calicoes, sweet little dimities and sprigged muslins—and then disappear, to reappear in a day or two with a Creation from a fashion plate. Sometimes Caroline wondered what that would be like, but more often she wondered what it would be like to own nothing but two frayed petticoats and a threadbare shawl; and she hoped she would never find out. As it was, precariously positioned between the two extremes, she haggled and argued and finally paid for some lengths of glazed cotton, striped rose and cream.

Although she had striven to give the draper the impression she was practically doing him a favor to take the stuff off his hands, she went home very well pleased with her bargain.

In the second phase of her dressmaking operation, Caroline donned her best daytime wear, a frilly yellow affair with fashionable leg-o'-mutton sleeves, purchased by the Colonel two months ago in his initial enthusiasm. With less sauntering and an air of demure respectability, Caroline descended into Fleet Street and thence to the Strand, Charing Cross, and the park. The fact that it was a pretty fair distance did not dismay Caroline. She wandered round the park, looking straight in front of her with apparent indifference, but keeping a sharp eye on the costumes of the ladies she passed. Hemlines, she noticed, were a bit lower: they no longer showed the ankle but just covered it. Waists were still high, but not quite so exaggerated as they had been a few years back when the ultra-French Empire look held sway. Some ladies, Caroline noticed, were wearing enormous sleeves, but she was afraid that such overstatements would put her new dress too quickly out of style to be practical. So—sleeves wide but not absurd, tapering to a narrow cuff, shallow vee-ed neck starting low on the shoulder, bodice cut on the bias to put the stripes to good advantage (and also her rather modest bosom), skirt bell-shaped and cut to swing gently from side to side at a walk. Caroline's new dress took shape in her mind.

It was to be expected that as the solitary feminine figure made its way up and down the pathways of the park a number of roving-eyed members of the opposite sex should take notice and, moreover, make overtures at acquaintance. But Caroline, having appraised each one, favored none with more than a cursory glance and a distant demeanor which put off all but the boldest. To the

boldest, she could reply in one of several ways. Her favorite was to develop a chronic tendency to cross her eyes; her least favorite was a well-placed jab with her knee. Such violent measures were, however, rarely necessary, and Caroline succeeded in dealing more subtly with the gentlemen who gave her the eye that afternoon in St. James' Park. She discouraged them all, for it was not a gorgeous young fashionable she had in mind for her new conquest; it was a City man, a man of solid means. Caroline had no social ambitions. She wanted only to be rich, rich not for the sake of ostentation but for the sake of security. It seemed to her that a City man of unimpeachable financial standing would do her infinitely more good than a host of titled friends and a multitude of exquisitely articulated promises. Time enough for them when I'm settled, she told herself, stolidly refusing to return the gaze of a particularly attractive young dandy. The trouble with these fellows is you can never tell if they've got money, or just credit with their tailors.

Removing herself from temptation, Caroline left the park through the Mall and made it home in time for tea. Armed with a revivifying cup, she put her aching feet up on the table, set a piece of paper on a book on her lap, and drew, to the best of her not inconsiderable ability, a sketch of the dress she proposed to begin work on in the morning when the light was good.

It was fine, she concluded, four days later after the last tiny stitch had been taken, it was her best work to date.

George, and even Tommy, agreed.

"Coo," said Tommy, "ain't you just the thing?"

George said, "You look *wonderful*!"

"You think so?" Caroline primped. "I had just the fraction of a doubt about this cream-colored bit."

Delicately, she fingered a line of ruching set into the

neckline. Actually, she hadn't had any doubt about it. It gave a tantalizing impression that if one got close enough one might see more snowy breast than one actually could. Caroline could almost feel George's eyes straining. It was a perfectly executed accent, and the row of plain cream buttons down the front of the bodice was another nice touch, especially since they did not really open the bodice. Caroline's aim was to be alluring, not blatant.

"Now what?" asked Tommy, happily wolfing down his customary slice of bread and jam.

Caroline pirouetted once more before sitting down with a nagging feeling of anticlimax. "Well," she said, "I don't know. I've never done this before."

"Don't, then," prompted George.

"He never did send any money, the bastard," Caroline commented, not irrelevantly.

A silence fell.

"Here, now, Carrie, I shouldn't be surprised if my dad could see his way to a bit of a loan, you know, to tide you over," said George.

"Over till what?" Caroline sounded despondent. "There's got to be another one sooner or later."

Silence fell again, to be broken by a repeated uncomplimentary observation about the Colonel.

"Caroline, why don't you get a *job*?" In his agitation George's voice broke, and he flushed scarlet. His suggestion had a good deal more to do with envy than with morality.

"I shan't!" cried Caroline, jumping up with an air of determined gaiety. "I shall buy some strawberries and a pot of cream to celebrate my new dress. You boys go home now and come back at suppertime. Tell your dad it's a special invitation."

George shook his head. "Carrie, you shouldn't squander the actual."

"Nonsense," she said. She went into the bedroom to change. "I like strawberries, and so do you, Graveairs, so it's not wasted. I *won't* scrimp and be poor. I shall enjoy it till it runs out, and then, if nothing—I mean nobody—has turned up, then maybe, Georgie, just maybe, I'll take an honest job." Or, on the other hand, she thought, I'll go for another stroll in the park.

Remembering the admiring glances she had garnered on that expedition, Caroline put on her yellow dress—after all, one never knew, and in a few minutes she accompanied the boys downstairs and to the end of the street. Having applied with no success to two local greengrocers for strawberries, she resolved to walk to Covent Garden. Of course, it was too late in the day, but at least she'd have tried, and the trek would do her good after sitting at home sewing for four days. She began to look about with interest and a resolution to raise her spirits by sheer force of will.

Much occupied in paying no attention whatsoever to two young men on the other side of the street, she swung round the corner with a purposeful spring to her step, and collided squarely with Somebody in a beautifully cut fawn-colored coat. From her initial vantage point, Caroline could see nothing but the coat, and if the coat had been shabby she would have recovered her composure in a twinkling. In fact, she might have given the wearer of this coat her considered opinion of people who didn't watch where they were going; it hadn't been a very good day. But the fabric of this coat was an indication that the day might improve considerably. Quite overcome by the violence of the collision, Caroline gasped and fluttered and almost fell, so that the Coat was obliged to put its arms around her to steady her on her feet. Underneath the coat there seemed to be a lean, strong body that offered charming possibilities. Convincingly dazed, but ready to re-

cover instantly, Caroline raised her face to scrutinize the face of this Person with the handsome coat and the attractive body.

Her recovery received a severe setback. The Person who was holding her, pardonably close, under the circumstances, and murmuring profuse apologies for his own clumsiness, was a gentleman of something like thirty years of age. He was fair, with dark greyish eyes set in a face more notable for its clean, even lines than for any particular feature, good or bad. This fair gentleman released her promptly when Caroline blushed in confusion and indicated her wish to be freed from his solicitous embrace. He waited politely for her to set her hat to rights and made a kind offer to see her to her destination. Caroline, still a bit shaken and just a trifle breathless, said that she would be grateful indeed for the gentleman's escort.

"Please," said the gentleman, offering his arm in a very graceful way, "allow me to introduce myself. My name is Price, madam, Geoffry Price. I am," he smiled faintly, "very much at your service. It seems to me that I have seen you somewhere before, but I do not think your name was made known to me."

Caroline allowed herself to feel a small pinch of disappointment. Why did they always say that? "I am quite sure, sir," she said primly, "that we have not met before."

"No, I don't think we have," he agreed unexpectedly, "but I'm sure I have seen you." He smiled again, still faintly. "You are not a person one would be likely to forget."

Caroline peeped up at him from under her eyelashes, and then, as she caught his eye, she looked away and blushed. Blushing at will was one of her most useful accomplishments.

"That is a compliment," she decided. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome," said Mr. Price.

They walked on in silence. When they came to the end of the street, Caroline indicated the way. They waited for a small carriage to pass, then they crossed the street and turned left. Mr. Price made no more conversation.

After some minutes Caroline asked uneasily, "Why don't you say anything?"

Mr. Price replied calmly, "You have not told me your name. I assume that means you do not wish to be acquainted with me."

"Oh." Caroline was relieved. "Well, you see, that's a bit of a problem."

Mr. Price regarded her solemnly.

"I'm sort of in between names, just now," she elaborated.

"I see. That would make you a punctuation mark of some kind."

This sally was rewarded with such a blank stare that Mr. Price felt constrained to beg her pardon, explaining somewhat weightily, "That was a joke. Not, I gather, a very funny one."

Recognizing the signs of incipient mortification, Caroline regrouped and giggled.

"Really, it is quite funny. Only to me, you see, the business of choosing a name is rather a serious one, so I wasn't, you know, expecting a joke."

Mr. Price replied that he dared say it was a significant problem and was sorry to have appeared frivolous.

"Actually," said Caroline, "my name, the one I was born to, is Skuttle. As in coal or ships."

She waited for him to laugh, or smile, or something, but he looked gravely attentive.

"It is a perfectly idiotic name ," she informed him in a low voice. "I am doing away with it."

"Quite right. It does not suit you at all."

Caroline smiled. "So I am left, you see, with only Caroline, for the time being."

"Caroline," decided Mr. Price, "suits you very well."

"It's not bad. I was thinking of something along the lines of, say, Seraphina, or Sophronia, or maybe Ernestine, but that would be a nuisance, because everybody knows me as Caroline and Caroline is, on the whole, pretty tolerable." Warming to her subject, she began to swing along beside Mr. Price with a bouncing gait which made her skirts brush rhythmically against his leg. Her eyes, when she glanced up at him, danced merrily. "Skuttle, now, is different. Very few people in London, in fact, no one who counts, know me as Miss Skuttle. Oh, isn't it *odious*? So I've been trying to come up with a replacement. Because one can't go about, really, with only one name. It doesn't sound dignified. Besides," she added punctiliously, "it is too familiar."

"Do you mean, then, that I shan't be able to talk to you at all? Would you not allow 'Miss Caroline'?"

"Oh, you. I didn't mean you, really. I meant that a single name would be inconvenient in general. For you —" She considered him reflectively, noticing that his moustache, while very fair, was full and had a delightful curl to it. "For you, I think 'Miss Caroline' is acceptable. Why not?"

Why not, indeed, thought Mr. Price. There was an imperceptible haze of preoccupation in his eyes as Caroline chattered on.

"I've considered a number of very impressive sorts of names—like Walsingford and Buckingham and Montgomery—but they don't seem to fit, somehow. I'm also thinking of something Frenchy, like Lavalliere or Delaporte. Caroline Delaporte," she pronounced experimentally. "What do you think of that?" She gave her

head what Mr. Price assumed she considered a haughty and elegant turn.

Adorable, yes; elegant, no. Mr. Price smiled. "I think you've got something there, with the 'd' or maybe the 't.' You need a sibilant, though, a soft sound, to balance 'Caroline.' Caroline is a liquid name, but brittle, like glass. You need a soft, silky sort of name for the other."

In some astonishment, Caroline could find nothing to reply but "Oh. Quite." She recovered in short order.

"I live in that house, there, with the straggling geraniums and the scrawny cat on the doorstep, over the chandler's. The cat," she confided, guiding him across the road, "is called Boots by the landlady, Mrs. Brown, but I call her Emma Hamilton—the cat, I mean, not Mrs. B.—because, you know, Emma Hamilton was supposed to be the most beautiful woman in the world. Did you know that?"

Mr. Price thought he had heard something to that effect.

"Well, I call the cat that because she is so ugly. I thought she should have something to live up to."

Mr. Price nodded soberly, though his moustache did twitch.

"That was a joke," Caroline quoted pompously. "But not, I gather, a very funny one."

Mr. Price was not in the habit of being made a mock of. He was decidedly not in the habit of being made a mock of in the middle of an unsavory lane in Ludgate by a naughty little slip of a girl, but when Caroline mimicked him, he laughed out loud. It was a rare occurrence. Mr. Price smiled, fairly often; he chuckled regularly. He was not a bad-humored man nor a sour sort of man. It was just that he was not a mirthful, belly-laughing sort of man. But here he was, laughing absurdly—and laughing, moreover, at his own expense. When Caroline invited him up to tea, there was really nothing he could do but go. Never mind

that he was expected back at the bank in, well, ten minutes ago. It was quite impossible to forego the invitation.

"I'm afraid everything's in a mess," Caroline apologized, letting Mr. Price in upstairs. She hastily cleared a book, a hat, and a pair of shoes off a chair so he could sit down. She tossed the whole lot helter-skelter into the other room and closed the door. If she did not see Mr. Price wince, it was because he had tactfully turned his head. Mr. Price was an extremely tidy person.

"The, um, girl I live with is out for the afternoon," said Caroline. She took off her bonnet and gloves, opened the bedroom door briefly to chuck them in, and then knelt down on the hearth.

"I'll start up the fire," volunteered Mr. Price. "You locate the tea."

He perched his hat, with his gloves tucked inside, precariously on a table strewn with books (romances), a shawl, miscellaneous ribbons, two figurines on a lacy doily, a tinderbox, a sugar bowl, two cups, one saucer, a spoon, and what looked incredibly like a stocking. After a moment's hesitation, Price retrieved his hat and set it on the floor beside his chair, where it looked rather more comfortable in the company of his neat black walking stick. Then he crossed the room, not many steps, to the fireplace and stooped down with the poker in his hand, careful to keep his cream-colored fustian knees off the floor.

"My word," said Caroline in some surprise, "here is the tea-caddy on the chimneypiece, right where it ought to be."

"My word," echoed Price with a straight face, and she giggled.

Over tea, Price discovered such fascinating things about Caroline as the fact that she was an orphan, which was true, that she had an obnoxious aunt, which was true,

that she had come away to London and got a job as a seamstress, which was not true. Beyond the first two facts, very little of what Caroline told Price was true. She said she lived with another seamstress, and they both worked in the same shop. Upon being asked where the shop was, she replied vaguely, "Over there," with a languid wave of the hand, and upon being asked if they had dealings in men's furnishings, she hastened to assure Price that it was strictly an establishment for ladies. In fact, one of the girls had been turned off, only because a gentleman had presumed to follow her there. Price indicated that he thought following young ladies about was a highly reprehensible practice, and Caroline looked distinctly easier. But suppose, Price suggested, he wished to purchase something for a lady, surely he might come into the shop. Quick to turn the subject, Caroline asked if he was in the habit of buying gifts for ladies. Was he married, for instance? No, Price was not married, but he had a mother and assorted female cousins. He would be only too happy to patronize Caroline's shop, if she would give him the direction.

At this point Caroline observed that if he were to come, he might certainly buy things, but he wouldn't see her, for the seamstresses worked in the back and were never allowed to speak to customers. In fact, Mademoiselle might not even own to her existence. She was very strict, was Mademoiselle. Price pointed out that she must not be so very harsh or Caroline would not have been so fortunate as to have the afternoon off. Nothing daunted, she launched into an explanation of afternoons off, of how on some days the hours were long but on other days there was not much to do and the girls were let off early. It was, in fact, quite an erratic schedule. Rather unusual. Rather, agreed Price.

Suddenly getting the feeling she was treading on thin

ice, Caroline asked if she might pour another cup of tea. Mr. Price said no, thank you, he must be getting on his way. He picked up his hat and stick and made for the door, chatting easily with both Caroline and Emma Hamilton, whom she held in her arms.

"May I call again?" he asked.

Caroline smiled and shrugged. "If you like. If I'm in, I'll be happy to see you. If I'm out, come another time." She extended her hand. He bent over it, just brushing it with his moustache.

At just this moment a haphazard collection of arms and legs and carroty hair came barreling around the corner of the stairs accompanied by a shout of "Carrie!" Taken aback, the mass brought itself to an abrupt halt and reintegrated itself into the form of Tommy. He said, "Beg pardon," and made as if to hurtle once more down the steps, but waited when Caroline said, "Don't go, Tommy. I'm just seeing Mr. Price out."

Price, unfazed, released Caroline's hand and nodded at Tommy, who mumbled, "Sir." Then he set off down the stairs as Tommy went up. Out of sight, Price continued to walk, making noise but no progress, until he heard the door to Caroline's rooms close. Then he went, very quietly, back up the half-flight of stairs and stood, still very quietly, outside the door with a whimsical look on his face.

"Coo," said Tommy's voice audibly through the closed door. "Some swell!"

Caroline's reply was apparently not vocalized.

"Where'd he come from?"

"He rescued me from falling in the street."

Tommy made a noise which could not be interpreted without the accompanying facial expression. "May be a good job you give Warby the boot after all. You think this fellow'll do?"

"I don't think he'll be back."

Caroline sounded rather dejected, and Price at his post outside the door started in surprise.

"Go on!" said Tommy. "Why not? He looked to have his appetites same as anybody."

"I daresay. But just at the end, something happened. He froze. He asked if he could call, but he was just being polite."

As the conversation turned to the unavailability of strawberries, Price, with a strange look, left once more, this time going all the way down the steps and out into the street.

It was uncanny! How had he given himself away?

He walked along slowly, thinking he really should take a cab.

Warby. It was that old goat Warburton, then. He remembered, it had been in Kensington Gardens. Though he'd only seen them from a distance, she had been wearing that same yellow dress. Someone had told him she was in the Colonel's keeping, but apparently that was over, at least, Tommy had made it sound so. Had the seamstress business been going on while she was with Warburton, Price wondered? If so, it was no wonder Warburton had broken the connection. As he understood it, the girl was working in an establishment that fronted as a dress shop, but she had rooms of her own and apparently free-lanced as well. Price gave a fastidious little shudder: think of the diseases you could get from a girl like that!

He began to walk a little faster and to wonder just what he was going to tell Mr. Avery at the bank.

But there were a number of things he hadn't figured out. If she was so busy as that, she should have been better off for money, for God's sake. And why had she refused to let him know where she worked? Not, Price assured himself, that he had any intention of seeking her out there; she was

not his sort of girl, that was clear. As a matter of fact, he had asked her all those questions merely because she was such a glib little liar and it amused him to hear her. He hadn't believed any of it, or that she had a job at all, until she started telling him about the dress shop. Then, dear God, it had become quite obvious.

Price realized he had been strolling pensively and stepped up his pace again.

But why had she apparently failed to consider him a potential customer? He glanced stealthily at his trim figure in a window. He tugged gently at his moustache, smoothed his hair over his ears. He had had a bath only yesterday. Clothes clean, expensive coat, well-made hat. Nothing unappetizing on his shoes. He frowned and, readjusting his gloves, began to walk faster.

Right, then, supposing him to be not repulsive, it was possible that she had suppressed the name of the establishment because she had him pegged as a free-lance possibility. But then—Price frowned again, and a small boy skittered apologetically out of his path. But then why had she given no indication, no indication at all, that she would welcome a proposition? Not, Price reminded himself, that he would have made any proposition—good God, the place was a zoo, but one might have expected her to offer some sort of encouragement. To have sat on the sofa, at the very least, instead of on that straight little chair.

Reminding himself once more not to drag his feet, Price admitted to being confused.

Very well, she was confusing. It was part of her ploy to be confusing, just as it was part of her ploy to be featherheaded and funny and pretty. And to crash into people and then melt against them when they held her in their arms. Price pursed his wide, thin mouth in irritation. It was his own damned fault. He could have caught her by

one elbow, begged pardon crisply, and continued on his way. Instead, he had embraced her with quite unnecessary fervor. Quite unnecessary. Positively indecent. Anyone might have taken him for a hardened roué. Any respectable girl would have been in a flame of indignation or of embarrassment. Any respectable girl would have had on more substantial underclothes. No girl with any pretensions to acceptability would have had a body like that. Or such eyes, such intoxicating blue eyes.

Bloody hell! Price remembered explosively. There was that damned steam-engine fellow from Northampton with an appointment for four o'clock, and here it was nearly five! Furious at having forgotten, he hailed a hackney cab and made all speed to Lombard Street.

II

Price held out for three days before capitulating. During those three days, he made inquiries about Caroline. When a pretty blond girl went by the window of the eating house when he was having dinner, not coincidentally, with the most avid gossip he knew, he took the opportunity to remark, "Whatever happened to that last young interest of Giles Warburton? I heard she left town."

"Did you know her?" countered Mr. Kelton eagerly. "The Colonel was damnably close with her, damnably close."

"No, I didn't know her. I merely gazed from afar. But you say 'did' I know her. So she is gone?"

"Well," Kelton admitted, "I don't know if it's true she's left town, but she has left Warburton. Or Warburton has left her. The way he tells it, she was deceiving him

wantonly with some young roustabout or some such type. They had a jolly row and he sent her to the deuce. Says she almost murdered him, throwing things at him—regular little hellion for all that cherubic face! But *I* don't know: you know how men are when they break with their lights-o'-love. One hears stories that are positively not to be believed. You know Chartley, Andrew Chartley?"

Price said he did, which he did not, and Kelton launched into what was indeed an incredible tale about Mr. Chartley. Price said, "Mm, yes," and "No, really," and wondered if it was true Caroline had thrown things at Warburton. He decided it was very possible.

Kelton concluded the story of Mr. Chartley. "Can you imagine? I never believed it, not one word, don't you know."

But you don't scruple to repeat it every chance you get, observed Price to himself as he smiled and said, "Well, it makes a good story," and wondered if maybe he shouldn't have listened after all. It might have been entertaining.

After this dinner Price went back to the bank and tried to catch up on some of the work he had let slip in the last day or two. By dint of concentrated effort, he managed to push blue eyes and golden ringlets out of his mind and accomplished a fair amount. But when he collected his various newspapers and financial reports and took them home to study, as he always did, he found that the words refused to make good sense. He could hold onto them for a paragraph or two, then they would dissolve into meaningless black marks that danced eerily before his eyes like a cabalistic revelation in a language he didn't quite know. Finally he decided he must be tired, and so, rather put about, Price went to bed.

There, the situation deteriorated. He could no longer pretend it was fatigue. It was that damned girl! If he lay on his back, he remembered how it had felt to hold her thin,

wiry body against him. He felt her hard little breasts against his chest and the smooth curve of her back inside his arm. If, annoyed, he rolled over onto his side, he got a crick in his neck, no matter how he bunched the pillow, and he couldn't arrange his knees comfortably. If he lay on his front, well, that was the worst of all. Try as he might, Price could not refrain from thinking of the firmness of her thighs, the jutting hipbones, and the softness of her belly in between.

Seething with irritation, he flung himself out of bed and hauled on his dressing gown. The kettle was on the hob, as it ought to be, filled , as it ought to be, and he put it on the fire to boil. He reflected that, after all, it had been some time since he had had a woman, and so it was only to be expected that he should have certain feelings about this girl Caroline. After all, he smirked, paraphrasing Tommy, I got my appetites same as anybody, and immediately he felt embarrassed. A crude thought, he reprimanded himself, crudely expressed. But still, there was something in it. If the girl was, as she seemed to be, in the public domain, why not just go to her? Come right out with it—why not? It was humiliating, that was why not! What if she said no?

It was ridiculous, Price chided himself. He had far more important things to do than to lose sleep over some little tart he had met in the street. There was the bank; there was his growing reputation as an investor; there was his railway scheme. It was this last that was closest to Geoffry Price's heart. Most people still scoffed at the steam engine; they said it was too expensive to make, too complex to operate, too much trouble to lay rails, too everything to be a success. But Price was of a different mind. He was putting money into carefully selected railways as fast as he could lay hands on it, and he knew—he did not hope, he did not dream, he *knew*—he would be a millionaire.

Then, he told himself, he could spend as much time, money, and energy as he liked on women. Right now he had to keep up with his work. He took the tea and the sugar out of the tea-and-spices cabinet and set them, along with a spotless cup and saucer and a shining spoon, on a tray. He placed the tray on a little round table whose smooth, polished surface was devoid of knickknacks. He fetched the kettle and made his tea, sitting down in a chair which had been thoroughly brushed that morning and would be brushed again next morning. He poured his tea, picked up the most complex of all his financial reports, and read ferociously until he fell asleep in his chair.

Caroline, meanwhile, slept the sleep of the innocent, to which she had no natural right. "Never mind," she had told herself before turning in. "If he doesn't come, he doesn't come. There are other fish in the sea."

Next day, Caroline assured herself that her dampened spirits had nothing to do with that man Price. It was the weather, a very warm, wet sort of weather that always made her head ache.

On the fourth day after he had made her acquaintance, Price presented himself once more at the front door of Caroline's residence. Mrs. B. favored him with a conspiratorial leer which melted into a disdainful shrug when it met with a frosty reception. She gestured him up the stairs and turned her back on him. In front of Caroline's door, Price stifled an impulse to straighten his collar and tidy his neckcloth. He stroked his moustache instead and took off his hat.

Just as he reached out to tap on the door, he heard a youthful but distinctively male voice on the other side say coaxingly, "Come, Carrie, say you will."

Price's hand was arrested in mid-motion. His face

was quite expressionless. He folded his hands neatly in front of him and listened.

A second voice chimed in, "Do, you must. Even Ma says you should come, being as it's a birthday."

Price recognized the second voice as belonging to young Tommy, and, satisfied that the proceedings were such as could be interrupted without indiscretion, he knocked. There was an unceremonious shout of "Right-oh!" which Price took as an invitation to enter, so he did.

"Well, how lovely!" cried Caroline impetuously, jumping up from the chair where she had been lounging crosswise with her legs draped over one arm. George and Tommy, sprawled opposite, sat up straighter. They did not look as though they found Price very lovely.

"You see," Caroline told him, as she took his hat and put him in the chair she had just vacated, "the place looks much better when it is tidy."

She waved a careless hand around the room, which now looked more or less civilized. It did not have at all the look of an interim *pied-à-terre*; it appeared to be a fulltime residence. There was no evidence of the apocryphal room-mate. The parlor was relatively cheerful, as cheap furnished rooms go, with a lot of red and brown and an occasional splash of yellow. The threadbare patches in the carpet were de-emphasized by the adroit placement of the furniture. The bric-a-brac—vases and figurines, artificial flowers—were of a quality noticeably superior to the rest of the furniture. Just, Price thought wryly, the sort of easily portable thing that could be conveniently pawned, if one found oneself without other means of support.

While he made his brief survey of the room, Caroline poured him a cup of tea, remembering that he wanted one and a half lumps of sugar. She sat down on a square stool

covered in faded red plush that disappeared beneath her skirts.

"Mr. Price rescued me the other day," she informed the Spencers. "Remember, Tommy, you met him on his way out. I had him up to tea on the spur of the moment." She gave an impish little grin. "I don't think he was terribly impressed by my housekeeping. But having him to tea was the least I could do, after—oh, but I should introduce you. Mr. Price, George Spencer, and Tommy Spencer. Geoffry Price."

Geoffry Price, who had been feeling about eighty-five years old as he gazed on the downy faces of George (eighteen) and Tommy (sixteen, almost), suddenly felt more at home by virtue of the simple mention of his Christian name.

"But I was telling you how he rescued me," Caroline continued vivaciously. "I was walking in St. Paul's Churchyard, minding my own business, looking in the shop windows, when two horrid fellows called out to me. They were good-looking, but very stupid, and absurdly young. They could just barely have been your age, George."

George, on his dignity, deigned make no reply to this, but his speaking countenance informed Geoffry that Caroline could not be much older than George herself.

"Well, of course," she continued, "I was much too sensible to pay them any mind, and I continued on my way without so much as a glance in their direction."

Geoffry wondered how, in that case, she had discovered they were good-looking.

"Then I could hear they were following me!"

Geoffry suppressed a look of surprise at this point. He had in fact noticed two boys sitting on a stoop across the road, but he had certainly not got the impression Caroline was being pursued by them or anybody else.

"Can you imagine such ruffianly behavior!" Caroline

was much shocked. "I was quite put out of countenance, and I hurried round the corner to get away from them. In my haste, I crashed straight into Mr. Price. I stumbled, and if it had not been for his quick reflexes I should surely have fallen in the street and been trampled to death. I was utterly terrified! Just think, Tommy, it might have been some of your dad's horses that trampled me. Mr. Spencer is the ostler in Blackfriars Lane, Mr. Price. My poor mangled corpse would have been buried in an unknown grave, and you would never have come up today for tea!"

Caroline seemed to find this idea very diverting. So did Tommy. George looked disgruntled.

There was a pause. Geoffry wondered if there were any way to get these damned boys to go away.

"Mr. Price works in a bank," Caroline remarked conversationally.

"Damn," burst out Tommy, "I'd a deal rather work with horses than work in a blinking bank!"

Caroline paled angrily, but Geoffry replied, "So would I" with heartfelt emphasis, and the ice was broken at last. Tommy asked if Geoffry had any horses, and Geoffry told him about his Nightingale. Caroline reflected silently that Geoffry must look very handsome in riding dress, with his ashen hair and a black coat and tight buff breeches. Tommy wanted to know how tall the horse was, how much he weighed, how much he ate, what were his good points, what were his weaknesses, where Geoffry had got him, what he had paid for him, and every other conceivable detail. On the subject of horses, George, too, had something to say. They told several rounds of stories such as only the aficionado can appreciate, stories about the most extraordinary horse, and the most extraordinary predicament, about the funniest horse, and the cleverest horse. By the time Geoffry remembered to check the time, the hour he had allotted himself for this visit was long

over. Neither of the boys showed any signs of preparing to depart, and Geoffry reminded himself that, after all, it was their tea party. He got up with good grace and took his leave.

"Spencer, it's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance," he told George, shaking hands.

"Yes, sir," returned George heartily, quite over his resentment.

"Tom, likewise a pleasure."

"Likewise, sir," echoed Tommy with a grin.

Caroline walked to the door and stood for a moment on the landing outside. "Thank you for being so kind to the boys," she murmured in a voice too low for them to hear, even though they were surely listening hard.

"Any friend of yours, Miss Caroline," said Geoffry with a little bow.

She gazed over his shoulder for a moment, as he looked down at her. Suddenly laughing, she raised her eyes to his. His hand clenched convulsively on his walking stick.

"I'm not really a seamstress, you know. Not the sort you thought, nor even the legitimate sort. I haven't a position at all." She tossed her head defensively, "I am independent."

"How," asked Geoffry evenly, "do you know what I thought?"

She shrugged. "I figured it out. How you looked when your attitude changed. Then I tried to think why. I just turned a lot of points over in my head until they sorted themselves out."

He smiled. "It was bad luck to choose seamstress. I daresay milliner would have been just as evocative, but there are plenty of neutral occupations. How did you hit upon seamstress?"

The intent, reflective look vanished all at once from Caroline's face. She put up her chin and replied with

dancing eyes, "Because, as a matter of fact, I am quite a good seamstress—not professionally, but as an amateur."

It was left to Geoffry, standing alone in the hall as the door clicked shut, to decide to what extent the remark was meant to be taken as a pun.

From that day Price found several reasons for calling on Caroline two or even three times a week. These reasons consisted mostly of the vague someone-should-keep-an-eye-on-her-a-young-girl-living-alone variety. Once having satisfactorily determined that she was quite well, he usually found himself staying for an hour or so. Sometimes they would sit companionably in the shabby little sitting room, Price in the faded armchair, Caroline on the dingy red plush stool. Often in the evening George and Tommy were there. Price no longer felt anxious to be rid of them; on the contrary, they had jolly conversations on a number of topics. Sometimes, if the weather was fine and it was a pleasant evening, Price and Caroline would walk alone, often across the bridge nearby, every once in a while upriver to Westminster.

Caroline found it was quite delightful to stroll along on the reassuring arm of a tall, athletic-looking gentleman whom the pickpockets seemed instinctively to shy away from. One, bolder than the others, made an attempt to relieve Price of a silk pocket handkerchief, but got nothing for his pains but a sharp crack on the skull with a walking stick. Caroline was impressed. She had to admit that Price was in all respects a satisfactory prospect, except for one troublesome thing: he seemed to have no intention of offering her his protection. But she was determined to give him a fair chance, so she didn't put her mind to making any more new contacts. In fact, such a project began to seem increasingly distasteful, but if Price didn't come up to scratch it was obvious that Caroline would have to do

something. Mrs. Brown had agreed to wait on the rent, but her credit with the butcher had already reached the breaking point, and the baker was beginning to behave as if he might soon insist on cold, hard cash—or possibly soft, warm Caroline as interest.

Money was such a nuisance, she thought wistfully, gazing at a pie vendor who, quick to perceive her glance, began brazenly to inform Price that the little lady wanted a pork pie and he was sure the gentleman wasn't that sort as would deprive his missus of such a simple indulgence as a pork pie, and so cheap, too. Unfortunately for the pie vendor, he had aroused Geoffry's suspicions and, once alive to the fact that Caroline had had no dinner, he bore her off to a quiet eating house where she disposed happily of as much roast beef and vegetables as she could without betraying the fact that she had not eaten a substantial meal in three days.

As they walked home, Geoffry was abstracted and thoughtful. Caroline, to help him come to the right conclusion in the inner debate she imagined he was conducting, walked close by his side as if they were already on terms of some intimacy, which, platonically speaking, they were.

It was not, Caroline complained to herself, as if he did not find her attractive. She was sure he did, for all he was so damnably polite. And he obviously had enough money to keep himself comfortable. So why shouldn't he be comfortable with her? She cozied up a little nearer on his arm.

Much to her surprise, he disengaged that same arm and curled it snugly around her shoulders. "You should have brought your shawl. It's got quite coolish."

Caroline reminded herself never to bring her shawl. She said nothing, and they walked on silently, up the hill and through Pilgrim Street into Carter Lane. Mrs. Brown greeted them with a speculative stare which inspired Price

to assume a more prudent posture as he accompanied Caroline up the treacherously dark stairs to her door. Inside, he stopped on the threshold, clearly not intending to stay. Caroline turned to face him.

"Caroline." He hesitated, and her heart beat a little faster. Go on, she urged him mentally.

"Caroline, you were very rash to invite me here, on such short acquaintance. I beg you will not do the same with other men you may meet in the street."

A lecture in deportment was hardly what she had been expecting. She decided a little prodding might be in order. "Do you think me so very innocent?" she asked with demurely lowered lashes.

"If you mean do I believe you to be a blushing virgin, the answer is, of course not," he replied bluntly.

Startled and not a little offended, Caroline looked up. He was frowning.

"The conditions under which you live," he went on, "would have left me in no doubt on that score, even if I did not happen to be aware of your recent connection with a certain military gentleman whose name, it seems to me, need not be bandied about. However, I do not think you are so wise as you imagine. It is not always easy to tell a gentleman from a villain, merely by the style of his speech or the cut of his coat. You must not receive people of whom you know nothing. You might be mistreated, perhaps very seriously."

Caroline pouted angrily and stared at the floor, resisting his gentle efforts to lift her chin.

"Come now, child, there's a world of difference between an amorous fling and a rape. Some men are pleased to be brutal. You could be robbed, beaten, abducted for all of that. I insist, Caroline, that you behave with due circumspection."

"Who are you," she burst out in a passion, "to insist I

do anything? Why don't you go away? I am quite monumentally bored by your prosing and preaching like an old schoolmaster!"

Taken aback by this barrage, Geoffry murmured, "I have only your welfare at heart, Caroline."

He encountered a stony silence. She had turned her back on him and stood, with folded arms, glaring furiously at the wall. Her head was tilted forward; there were spun-gold ringlets curling softly against the nape of her neck.

"Are you hard-up for money, Carrie? Is that it?" he asked, unconsciously fanning the fire. He had his hand in his pocket ready to draw out his pocketbook by the time she flounced round.

"Go *away*!" she shouted, pushing him toward the door. "Just go away! You *will* drive me to the streets!"

Very much on his dignity, Price went out and went home.

Sitting down to supper, he reflected for a few minutes on Caroline's unaccountable behavior, arriving after a while at the somewhat tortuous conclusion that it was a natural childish reaction: she was vexed at having been taken to task. Geoffry decided that it was just possible his tone had been a bit patronizing, and then he forgot about the whole affair, becoming absorbed in the business of the evening. This consisted, as usual, of a certain amount of reading, writing letters, and making sure everything was in order for the morrow. He thought a bit about the holiday he had been offered, but couldn't make up his mind whether to take it this month or next, or perhaps to forego it altogether this year. By the time he went to bed, the contretemps with Caroline had completely gone out of his head.

Or so he thought. His dreams proved otherwise. He had all sorts of dreams that night about the desperate things

that might happen to an imprudent young woman. He dreamed he came to Caroline's lodgings to find her unconscious, lying in her shift on the mangy carpet; he dreamed he found her gone, with a scattering of opium powder left behind on the table. He also dreamed, in meticulous detail and vibrant color, of a handsome, debonair gentleman in a long black robe who slipped through the front door as Caroline stood, unsuspecting, looking in another direction. Her golden hair, pulled up, had left little tendrils curling against her smooth white neck, and the man in the black robe stared at them, fascinated. Suddenly he grabbed her from behind, covering her breasts with rough hands and pressing his lips hard to those delicate golden curls. Too startled to oppose him, she let him have his will of her, which he did savagely, with kisses that bruised, caresses that tore her clothes and made her cry out in pain. He took her several times, each time more ingeniously cruel than the time before. She begged for mercy, but he only laughed as he renewed his lustful exertions. When, finally sated, he carried her, bleeding profusely, to her bed, he lay her down with a very kind, very tender kiss on the cheek and said, "You see, my dear, you should never trust men you meet in the street." Even in his dream, Geoffry was very little surprised to realize that the long black robe was that of a schoolmaster, and that the face, when it looked back at him benevolently, was his own.

He sat up to find that his bed, not unexpectedly, was in chaos.

"Dear God, I never knew I had such a fertile imagination," he remarked to himself. "I never should have read that damned French rubbish. Marquis, indeed."

Next morning, Geoffry very politely told Mr. Avery that he would take his holiday next week, if it was quite

convenient. Mr. Avery agreed that it might be just the thing for him; Price was looking as if he could do with a bit of a rest. Price agreed. Later that day, he sent off a letter which, to judge by the time he took to write it, had been carefully thought out in advance. He went home to supper and then, enjoying the summer evening air, sauntered unhurriedly down to Caroline's.

"Am I in disgrace still?" he asked charmingly, capturing her hand as she opened the door to him.

"Maybe," she replied. But her eyes twinkled. "We shall see if you can comport yourself agreeably today. If you can't, I warn you I shall send you away just as I did yesterday."

"Yes, madam. I'll do my best, madam, to be everything that is agreeable," said Geoffry, and good relations were restored forthwith.

For some reason known only to the gentleman, it was not until Saturday, as they were walking on the embankment of the river, that he broke a silence to remark casually, "I've been planning to go to Brighton on holiday. I've been enjoying your company so much, I've been putting it off, but it has occurred to me that I might perhaps induce you to join me."

Finally! Caroline exclaimed to herself. And a right royal slowcoach you are!

"I'm sure Brighton is very pleasant this time of year, Geoff, but I've given my landlady notice that I shall be out of my lodgings by the end of the month. I think I must stay in London to see about finding a new place to live." She gazed demurely at her little yellow gloves.

There was amusement in Geoffry's voice as, entirely undeceived by this maneuver, he returned, "If you would be so good as to grant me the pleasure of your company on my holiday, I shall be happy to render you the service of

finding you lodgings for your return. Lodgings, perhaps, where the carpet does not have bare patches under every stick of furniture."

"But the rent would be higher, for lodgings with a fine carpet," she pointed out, still observing her primrose fingers.

There was a silence of some length, as Geoffry tried to force himself to consider the expense of keeping a woman. All he could think of was the woman, and hang the expense.

"Unless we have some irreconcilable disagreement while we are in Brighton, I don't think you need concern yourself about the rent, Caroline," he said.

There was a short pause.

"Oh, I see," said Caroline. And a good thing for you, too. I'm not to be taken up and tossed aside week by week. If you'd have said anything else, I'd have refused you flat.

Geoffrey stood leaning on the railing, perfectly composed, while Caroline played an imaginary scale with the fingers which had a moment ago been so still. She was not making up her mind; she was counting the seconds until a suitable amount of time had elapsed before she replied.

"When do you go to Brighton?" she asked finally.

"Tomorrow morning, if that would suit you. Or the next day, if you prefer."

"So you expect an answer immediately?"

"No. I can call in the morning. If you come, you come; if you don't, I'll go by myself."

Damnably cool, Price, damnably cool! thought Caroline angrily. You might have the common graciousness to pay me one rotten compliment, to seem just one whit anxious for an affirmative reply.

All at once she threw back her head and laughed merrily. "What's the point in shilly-shallying? Of course I'll come on holiday with you! I'm mad to see the sea, I'm

wild to go on holiday, I'm perishing to visit Brighton, and as for you—well, I like you very much!" She leaned over and patted his hand. "Thank you for a lovely invitation, which it pleases me to accept."

III

Next morning Geoffry drove up precisely as the church bells tolled the specified hour of nine o'clock. Caroline had herself and her bandboxes ready to go when he came to the door. If he was gratified by her punctuality, he didn't say so, but she knew he would have been annoyed if she had kept him waiting.

She posed for him in a new wide-brimmed bonnet of pale straw with red ribbons that matched her new dress, which she was wearing in defiance of the rigors of the journey. "What do you think?"

"Charming," said Geoffry absently, seeing that the porter got all the boxes. "Charming," he repeated, turning to face her and taking her hand. As his eyes traveled over her, taking in the sparkling eyes and the eager smile as much as the new hat, he amended, "Very charming."

Satisfied, Caroline allowed herself to be led down the stairs and handed into the carriage, a smallish black barouche, very tidy and sensible, with a pair of slightly restive bays. The street was alive with watching faces. Tommy, who just happened to be in that end of the street at that particular time, examined the horses and pronounced them to be sweet steppers, for sure. Geoffry said he was much reassured to have Tommy's approval. He left Caroline in the coach while he had a little word with Mrs. Brown. He later mentioned to Caroline that her obliga-

tions to Mrs. Brown had been discharged, and her remaining effects would be sent to her new address. Tommy had promised to oversee their removal and delivery.

Caroline, not quite able to think of anything to say after, "Thank you," reflected that Geoffry really could adopt the grand manner when he chose to. Then she reflected that if Mrs. Brown had been seen to her new hat was not such a wicked extravagance after all. She allowed herself to sink into a happy assurance of being taken care of and turned her attention to the affairs of the moment.

"So, Geoff, we're off to the sea!" She smiled brightly and gave a bit of a high-spirited bounce.

"That we are, my dear," he replied with an answering smile but no bounce.

"And by private carriage, too! Is it yours?"

"God, no. I've not got an equipage of my own. Yet," he added in a tone of some determination. Then he smiled again. "But I have got two horses—Nightingale and a little mare I didn't mention to the Spencers for fear of appearing purse-proud to a sensitive soul like George. Her name is Pretty Penny, because that is the color she is and that is what she cost me. She was, I'm afraid, an indulgence, for one horse was more than adequate. But she was such a love I had to buy her, even though I knew she'd be expensive."

Like you, he added inaudibly.

Like me, thought Caroline.

Geoffry stretched out his legs and put one arm around her with a light laugh. She ignored his arm and gave him a sidelong glance out of dancing eyes.

"You seem to be in a very good humor this morning, sir."

"And why not? The weather is glorious and we are on holiday. I have already arranged for our transportation and our lodgings. I have money in my pocket and just the right

girl by my side. Not a care in the world! How could I fail to be in surpassing good humor?''

Caroline continued to peek up at him. He was looking out the window, enjoying the view down the river as they crossed Blackfriars Bridge.

''How do you know I'm the right girl?''

The question sounded somehow more saucy than shy, which was not what she had intended. Her eyes dropped to her hands in her lap, but she could tell her companion had turned to look at her.

''May I kiss you?'' he said.

What a peculiar man, Caroline exclaimed to herself. I have agreed to be his mistress, and he requires permission to kiss me. She imagined how it would be if he asked permission for everything she expected him to do, sooner or later, and she had difficulty repressing a giggle.

''I am waiting for an answer, Caroline.'' The soft voice had lost none of its even politeness.

Caroline raised slightly mocking eyes and said flatly, ''Yes.''

His lips were on hers almost before the word was out, and Caroline made a startling discovery. The punctilious, reserved Mr. Price was not such a stuffed shirt as he appeared. He kissed her with an aggressive sexuality that was the last thing she would have expected of him. Her pulses were pounding by the time he released her, and her cheeks were aflame.

''I am reassured of my intuition,'' he commented airily. ''I'll take the rest on faith.

Caroline stared at him for some moments, as he gazed unwaveringly out the window. Finally she remarked, ''Well, really,'' in a significant sort of way, and settled her head against his imperturbable shoulder.

After a time, he realized she was nodding drowsily. He untied her bonnet and pulled it off, tossing it onto the seat

opposite and absently explaining that it was getting squashed.

"Oh, Lord, I mustn't injure my new bonnet! Who knows when I may get a new one?" she murmured, with a giggle Geoffry neither understood nor particularly cared about.

What he did care about was the warmth of her body next to his and the smell of her hair. Devil take it, he thought, putting his face into the cluster of golden curls and breathing deeply, this chit is going to cost me. Why did I settle with that gargoyle Brown? It wasn't my affair. Well, it's done now, but I must mind what I'm about.

As the coach jolted along, sometimes at no more than a walking pace, Geoffry thought complacently of the railroad and pondered his financial future. He figured he would be able to buy a substantial amount more stock before the year was out, provided his East India affairs came off well. He spent some time reviewing the possible options among the fledgling companies he had been studying. Some of them would be squeezed out in the competition to establish dominance in a particular geographic sector, and woe betide the man who backed the wrong company, for when a railway failed, it failed with a vengeance. It was hard to see what made one company fail where another succeeded, but Geoffry had ideas on the subject. He felt that it was all a question of management. He believed a railway could succeed anywhere in England, provided the management was sound. And a railway could fail, even on the most promising route, if it was managed by a lot of hot heads who took unnecessary risks in deciding where to invest. Geoffry studied thoroughly every aspect of a company, for there were fortunes to be made. Would it be best, he wondered, to sink everything into one company? One could lose one's shirt, of course,

but one had also the most to gain. If he chose, instead, to diversify, to what extent should he do so and in which companies? Of course, he reflected, he hadn't done badly so far in India. Dramatic amounts of money were won and lost in India, but the vagaries of chance were murderous, too much for Geoffry's tidy soul. India was too far away; there were too many unpredictable elements. It was only an interim business. As soon as Geoffry could see his way clear, it would be all rails, at home in England, where he could keep a good sharp eye on what was happening and where he had at least a fighting chance of understanding the climate of public opinion. In the meantime, well, he though, breathing once more the fragrance of clean sunshine curls, things were going along pretty well.

Caroline slept tranquilly for nearly an hour, awakening to a restless energy that prompted her to ask innumerable questions about the road, the villages they passed, and whatever remarkable or not so remarkable miscellany they encountered on the way. Taking the whole rather childishly appealing business in good part, Geoffry answered as many questions as he could. He told her, for instance, that at Reigate there was a castle that had been mistreated by the Parliamentarians during the Civil War and had some sort of connection with the Magna Carta; that Howard, who conquered the Armada, was buried in a nearby church. He found Caroline's knowledge of history to be surprisingly impressive, though spotty, and they beguiled some time in a discussion of the Hanoverian succession.

Dinner had been ordered at The Grapes, a little more than halfway along the route. At Caroline's request, it was served out of doors under the shade of an extensive arbor laden with rich purple fruit. This stop, originally scheduled for an hour, developed into an interlude of nearly two and a half. Geoffry came very close to hiring a

room at the inn for the afternoon, but thought better of it because he was a man who liked to do things according to plan.

It was nearly evening when, with recently changed horses, the neat black coach clattered into the outskirts of Brighton, past Preston Park, with the new suburban rowhouses of Hove marching gracefully along the hillsides off to their right. When Caroline exclaimed over their ordered elegance, she was told that the hotel she would stay in was just such a handsome Regency building, all shining white stucco and black wrought-iron balconies overlooking the sea. At a word from Geoffry, the coachman cut off the main London road halfway down the Grand Parade and brought them through the old part of town, where narrow, complicated little lanes could be seen branching off from Ship Street, the road they took straight down to the sea. Turning left onto King's Road, they drove along the waterfront while Caroline, saucer-eyed but now silent, stared at the broad, smooth expanse of the water, greying as the light began to fade. Geoffry pointed out the Old Steyne as they passed into Marine Parade, but Caroline was too engrossed in the view of the sea, which she had never seen before, to pay much attention. Shortly, the carriage pulled into a shallow crescent to discharge its passengers. Caroline, all thoughts of sea and architecture gone from her head, concentrated on straightening her hair, putting her hat on neatly, and smoothing down her skirts before she was handed out of the coach and up a few steps into the hotel.

As they entered the foyer, Geoffry murmured sharply, "Don't gawk, child."

Much abashed, Caroline lowered her eyes and kept them lowered as he settled her into a chair. It was covered in a shiny fabric with blue-and-cream stripe. Caroline couldn't resist rubbing it with one gloved finger. It was very fine. Suddenly afraid that looking timid was as

gauche as staring about her, she glanced up nonchalantly. Geoffry was shaking hands with an official-looking middle-aged man in a black coat, who smiled. Though she couldn't hear him, Caroline could see him saying, "Good afternoon, Mr. Price. How pleasant to see you."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Neils," replied Geoffry with perfect affability. "I'm afraid you were expecting us a little earlier. It was such a lovely day we spared the horses."

Mr. Neils made a not-quite-visible effort to keep his eyes from the fair girl in the blue-and-cream chair.

"Yes," he said, apropos of not much, "I recall your letter mentioned that you expected to be traveling with a companion." Mr. Neils was embarrassed. "I'm afraid I stupidly assumed you referred to a male companion, and the accommodations I described to you are perhaps not entirely suitable. If you would care to make some adjustment, I feel certain we could arrange—"

"Not at all," broke in Geoffry amicably. "The accommodations you described will do admirably. I have your letter right here," he added, reaching for his pocket. "I remember thinking how excellently you had picked the very sort of suite I had in mind. But then, you are a most astute *maitre d'hôtel*, Mr. Neils."

God damn you, thought Mr. Neils, smiling with professional politeness. I've a good mind to give you the old I'll-have-you-know-this-is-a-decent-hotel speech and kick you out on your arse. It wasn't the girl he minded so much as the consummate coolness of her introduction. If she had been presented as Mrs. Price, he wouldn't have batted an eyelash. And if next summer Mrs. Price were a buxom brunette, it wouldn't have fazed him. But damn it all, this way Neils was put in a deucedly awkward position, and he was annoyed.

He was, however, not quite annoyed enough to offend

Mr. Price, who was a client of long standing. He said, "If you are satisfied, sir, we'll leave things as they are. Would you like to be shown upstairs immediately, or would Madame prefer a light refreshment in the salon?"

"Let's ask her," Geoffry suggested, and they walked over to where Caroline had recovered her composure enough to smile at them. When consulted, she signified her wish to go upstairs straight away.

The rooms Neil had chosen for them were charming—light, airy, comfortably furnished in purely English Regency style with none of the Empire about it. There were windows on two sides of a sitting room, which thus benefited both from a view of the sea and the morning sun. On the sea side, there was a covered balcony, and there were several wrought-iron chairs. The bedrooms, one on either side of the sitting room, were rather small, but although the furniture was minimal it could not be said to be sparse, for everything that was necessary was there and attractive. Geoffry inspected both bedchambers and casually laid his hat and gloves on the table in the eastern one. He indicated his entire satisfaction to Neils and arranged for their baggage to be brought up and for a maid to help them unpack. Caroline disappeared into the second bedroom.

In the privacy of the little green-and-white chamber, she pulled off her bonnet and danced for sheer delight. She had never been anywhere nearly so grand. Geoffry must have even more money than she had supposed. Tossing her hat onto the bed, she capered over to the windows and threw them wide to look out over the sea, which made a clearly audible rushing noise even though it was across the road and at the bottom of a cliff. Seagulls wheeled with plaintive cries; the sun was setting in a soft haze of red that shimmered in reflection on the surface of the water. Caroline thought she was in heaven.

"You are not disappointed in Brighton so far," said a quiet voice behind her.

"Have you seen the sunset?" she asked. Her blazing eyes answered his remark.

Geoffry gazed at her complacently. "If anybody calls you Mrs. Price, you'll take it in stride, I trust?"

Caroline nodded, unconcerned. "Did you tell them I was?"

"No. Goes against my principles. But since I also didn't say you weren't, I expect Neils will pretend you are for the sake of appearances." He chuckled. "Poor old Neils. He gave in with a very good grace, I thought. I must be getting to be somebody. Of course, it is August. We are frightfully out of fashion, you know. No one who is anyone would be caught dead at Brighton in the summertime."

He led the way to the balcony.

As she sat down, Caroline asked, "Why ever not? Surely the warm weather is the best time for enjoying the sea."

"No doubt. But the fashionable world is entirely uninterested in rationalities. The 'season' in Brighton is October to March. If the king is here, so much the better; if not, never mind, the 'season' is still October to March. It wasn't always so, but it is now—quite lunatic. It must be unbearable here during a raw winter storm."

"I don't know," rejoined Caroline, leaning indecorously over the balustrade. "I think the sea would be fascinating in a storm."

"Fascinating, but extremely disagreeable."

Caroline smiled. "Have you no romance in your soul, you banker?"

"Very little," he replied drily.

He went on, however, to disprove this allegation, at least as Caroline saw it.

"Have you got a name for yourself yet, or have you resigned yourself to Skuttle?" he asked in an offhand sort of way.

"Never!"

"I have a suggestion." He raised a contemplative finger. "I was watching you, in there, frisking about, and it occurred to me that you are always so light, graceful, always in motion—dancing through life. I think you might call yourself Caroline Dancer."

She stared at him. "How charming you are!"

"Charming? Not at all. It seems sensible to me. Evocative, attractive, but not withal so very obvious. Of course, if you really were a dancer it would be out of the question, but as it is. . . . Do you think it too whimsical?"

"I think it's lovely!" she cried. "But surely you see that it is also an enchanting compliment?"

Geoffry's moustache gave a twitch that Caroline was beginning to recognize.

"You do!" she squeaked indignantly. "You are making game of me! It is too bad of you!"

"I'm not making game of you, silly child; I am enjoying you."

"Well, whatever, it is a pretty conceit. I thank you very much for the new name. I shall adopt it."

"Happy to oblige, ma'am," said Geoffry.

There was a knock at the door. Caroline sat back in her chair and looked blasé.

It was the maid, who not only helped Caroline to unpack but also helped her to change her clothes. Caroline was slightly unnerved by this experience, but she found there was very little difference from being helped by just anybody and being helped by a real maid, except that the maid was not so clumsy.

Caroline decided that the best tactic in dealing with the domestics was to be dignified but pleasant and say as little

as possible. The most important thing was not to show that she was nervous, whereas, in fact, she had never been so nervous in her life. She had been in unfamiliar situations before, situations she had felt ill-equipped to handle, but she had always muddled through happily by getting on good terms with the servants and taking an attitude of us-against-them. Now for the first time she did not want to be "us," she wanted to be "them," and the servants were no longer her allies. It seemed crucial that Geoffry not be embarrassed by her. She must please him, for if he was not a rich fool, at least he was rich. Caroline saw him as an excellent business venture. It was no more than convenient that he should also be young and handsome and agreeable.

Once she had dressed for dinner and dismissed the maid, Caroline had a chance to take stock of herself in her new surroundings. A critical survey in the mirror revealed a pretty girl in a neat, clean, definitely last year's dress. Caroline bit her lip in vexation. When she reviewed the five dresses in her wardrobe, the situation was the same. All except the yellow and red stripe she had just made were dowdy; there was no getting round it. Each had been a relatively expensive dress in its day, for Caroline believed in having one good dress rather than two cheap ones, but now they were old and dated. She worried about this for several minutes, then she reflected that it was no good stewing about it now. She couldn't possibly start wheedling new clothes out of Geoffry for another few days, so she'd just have to make the best of it. She smiled at herself in the mirror and pointed out to herself that even if it wasn't new, it was a very becoming dress, pale blue with a brighter blue garland of satin flowers scalloped around the hem. It had a graceful scooped neck, not too low, and the shoulders were capped with heavy satin bows over short puffed sleeves. Caroline pretended that she

liked white slippers every bit as well as blue or silver ones and told herself that as long as she was sitting down, no one would notice that her skirt was too short.

"Stop puffing yourself up," she remarked at last to the girl in the looking glass. "No one is going to notice you at all." She gave her ringlets a quick fluff and walked resolutely out into the sitting room.

Geoffry was waiting on the balcony, gazing out over the rapidly darkening sea. When he turned round, Caroline's carefully nurtured self-confidence deserted her in a rush. To her unsophisticated eyes, he was dazzling. She had never seen him in evening clothes, and the ones he wore now seemed in perfect harmony with this gracious environment that overwhelmed her. He wore close-fitting black trousers and a tailed coat, cut in front to reveal a broad expanse of white embroidered waistcoat. His neckcloth was silk and more intricately tied than the one he wore during the day. He was, in fact, wearing quite normal, decent dinner clothes, and was not particularly dressed up.

"I know it's a prerogative of the sex," he said, "but need women always take three times as long to dress as men? I might have starved to death in the last half hour."

"What time are we expected to eat?" asked Caroline.

Geoffry considered. "Dinner, we were expected to have shortly after we arrived, which would be about two hours ago. Supper is not served for another three or four hours, by which time I shall surely have expired. In other words, they keep town hours here, more or less. Therefore, it is my suggestion that we ignore what everybody else is doing and have whatever we are going to have here and as close to now as possible."

"Well, why didn't you order while you were waiting?" asked Caroline with a little shrug. She was very much relieved at the prospect of staying upstairs.

"I thought you might like to be consulted."

He went to pour a glass of wine from one of the decanters on a little table near the door. At the same time he pulled on an immaculate white tassel connected to a white cord that disappeared intriguingly through a hole in the wall. Caroline wondered how much the hotel had to spend on replacing tassels; why didn't they pick a more practical color? She reflected that maybe the people who stayed here never had dirty hands. Certainly Geoffry never did.

When he brought her glass, Caroline smiled at him, and a dark, hot flame leapt into his eyes as he looked at her. Recognizing that expression, she glanced away, disconcerted and annoyed with herself for being so. She raised the glass to her lips and took a substantial swallow which, to her infinite embarrassment, made her cough.

"It's sherry, Caroline. Sip at it." He lowered his voice and confided in a maddening whisper, "You can tell by the amber color."

She resisted the urge to dash the contents of the glass in his face, contenting herself with a murderous glare and a toss of the head. Then suddenly sheer exuberance overcame her uneasiness, and she laughed aloud.

"It's lovely, sherry. Everything is lovely!"

She ran to the balcony and leaned over the railing in a flash of white petticoats.

"Don't fall," warned Geoffry. "I've not yet got any return on my investment."

She swung round and regarded him saucily through the darkness. "Is that what I am, an investment? I've been called a number of things before, but never that!"

She was rewarded by a laugh.

"No, ma'am, in fact you are not. What possible value could you have as an investment? You are strictly a diversion."

When the maid came in answer to the summons of the white tassel, she was asked to see to supper. Since Caroline could think of nothing in particular that she wanted, or, rather, was too shy to ask, it was left largely to the discretion of the cook. When the food came, they found that they were ravenous. Between them, they demolished the greater part of a cold chicken, most of a rabbit, some duck, a dish of boiled vegetables, and several hard-cooked eggs in mustard sauce. Caroline consumed two peaches and a large number of grapes, while Geoffry finished off the bread. Caroline warned him the cheese was moldy, but he seemed to like it. Finally, sated, they toasted themselves with the last of the second bottle of wine.

Caroline considered a third peach regretfully and decided to put it in her room for later.

"Carrie, you can always ask for another. You pull the bell, and when the maid comes you ask for a peach. Then she brings it. There is order in this world. Ask and ye shall receive, you know."

It was just possible that Geoffry was not entirely sober, but Caroline was too tipsy herself to notice. "I don't care," she retorted. "I might want it in the middle of the night. Also some grapes." She snatched up a large bunch and skipped into the bedroom so energetically that she did not hear the barely audible observation that she was going to be too much occupied to eat fruit in the middle of the night. As she was depositing her stores in the washbasin, Caroline was informed that she should bring a wrap, because they were going out. Accordingly, she ferreted a light wool shawl out of the wardrobe.

"Where are we going?"

"Out," said Geoffry. In the hall it occurred to him that this reply was perhaps unnecessarily succinct. "After so

much supper," he explained, "it will do us good to walk about a bit. What would you prefer to view, the town or the sea?"

Caroline thought it would be much more sophisticated to stroll about town, but really she preferred to walk by the sea. Besides, her skirt was out of date.

By the time they had sauntered along the promenade and down on the beach for an hour, the effects of the wine seemed to have worn off, and so had the lethargy brought about by their superabundant supper. So, unfortunately for her, had Caroline's insouciance. She felt she could be quite happy walking all night by the tirelessly washing waves, listening and smelling the brisk salty air. But that wasn't what men kept mistresses for.

Don't be such a fool, Caroline told herself sternly. If you could put up with Stirling, and with old Warby, surely you can take on this fellow. Why should you have the fidgets? Do you imagine he'll turn out to be a maniac and beat you? What nonsense! He's a lovely man. Besides, my girl, you haven't a feather to fly with; if worst comes to worst, you can always empty his pockets while he sleeps it off and give him the slip. She stole a glance at her companion's profile as they went through the hotel lobby. His face was impassive, but when he felt her looking at him, he turned his head and smiled.

Now for God's sake, Caroline apostrophized herself, how can you be afraid of a man like that?

He took her to the door of their suite and rang for the maid. Then he said, "I'll join you in a few minutes," in a curiously thick voice and went back downstairs.

Left to her own devices, Caroline considered bolting a large amount of sherry, but thought better of the impulse. She waited quietly for the maid. It occurred to her at the last moment to remove her stores of fruit from the washstand. Just as she had done this and stowed them in a

drawer, the maid came in. Contrary to her expectations, it was a welcome intrusion. The maid put away her clothes, took orders about pressing things for the morrow, helped her to wash, and brushed out her hair. Caroline was quite in charity with the little maid by the time she found herself in bed with the lamp turned down, the pillows plumped and the covers smoothed over her.

When she heard the door close behind the departing servant, she jumped out of bed to retrieve her peach and put it back, close to hand in the washbasin. Then she jumped quickly back into bed as she heard the door open again. Geoffry crossed the sitting room and went into the other bedchamber. It seemed like a very long time before Caroline heard him cross the sitting room again. She smoothed her hair hastily and closed her eyes.

She opened them again when he turned up the light. He sat down on the edge of the bed and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. The fevered look she had seen briefly before was very strong in his face.

"How can you be so pretty?" he whispered.

Her hair was longer than he had imagined, and he could see that her coiffure of clustered ringlets owed more to the curling iron than he had thought. Very deliberately, he folded down the bedclothes and looked at her body. Caroline lay still, watching his eyes.

God, she thought, he is handsome when he looks so. "Aren't you going to ask permission?" she asked.

He smiled, but said nothing. He reached out to run his hands down her torso. It felt exactly as he remembered it from that first embrace on the street corner: hard little breasts, soft flat belly between bony hips, long firm thighs. He pulled off his dressing gown and dropped it on the floor.

Caroline rolled over to give him room. She was mildly surprised to see that he was naked. She had not thought

him the type to come to bed without a neat white night-gown, properly buttoned to the collar and perhaps lightly starched. Then she remembered the way he had kissed her in the carriage. He slipped between the sheets, and she waited for him to put out the light. He didn't. He tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her head toward him.

As his open mouth came down on hers, Geoffry felt several Catherine wheels go off inside his head. He made a valiant effort to concentrate on the square root of forty-seven. He attempted to name the kings and queens of England in chronological order. It was no use. He moaned and swore under his breath as he felt the girl stiffen, frightened by his violence. Within a very few moments their first sexual encounter was over.

Caroline fought down a panicked impression of having been raped. It required all her determination not to begin to cry. Was he always so? she wondered, forcing herself to think rationally. Could she ever become accustomed to it?

Then she realized he was still holding her very tightly, not out of lust anymore, but out of tenderness.

"I beg your pardon, child. Did I hurt you?"

"Hurt me?" said Caroline. "Of course not."

"But I scared you. I'm sorry. It will not be so another time."

"I wasn't scared," she said, but she could tell he knew it wasn't true.

She let him roll over, holding her still, and she snuggled against him though she felt like jumping out of bed and running away. She watched the orderly triangle of pale curls on his chest rise and fall with his breathing.

It could not have been much more than an hour later, Geoffry thought, when he woke up. There was a crick in his neck, and his arm prickled painfully where the girl's head had cut off the circulation. He shifted his elbow

experimentally; she seemed to be asleep. Flexing his fingers, he looked at her still face. She seemed so young. For one awful moment a little while ago he had thought he might be mistaken about her. He had found her to be no virgin though, and he could hardly see the old Colonel in the role of the benevolent father figure. She must be what she appeared to be. A barque of frailty, he thought, smiling at the quaintness of the term. He had an urge to go look out the window, but he was loath to leave her, as though she would mysteriously vanish if he turned his back. Smiling again at this fanciful notion, he reached to put out the lamp, which had been forgotten. Then he stopped and looked at the girl again. She lay on her side, half turned away from him, her small breast creating only the gentlest swell against the stuff of her nightgown. He touched it softly. She did not stir. He fingered the nipple until it stood stiff and hard. Then he sat up, carefully drawing aside the bedclothes. The girl's nightgown covered her knees. Her feet, he saw, were long and elegant, the toenails neatly tended, cut short. He traced a blue vein up to the ankle, then ran his hand delicately up her leg. She was very thin. It was not till he had her nightgown bunched around her waist that it occurred to him she was too still, and he glanced up to see a pair of very bright blue eyes fixed on him.

"I am going to feed you on steak-and-kidney pie and cream puffs three times a day," he said.

"It makes no odds." Caroline sat up and raised her arms like an obedient child as he pulled her nightgown over her head. "I'm always scrawny, no matter how much I eat. When I worry, I get even thinner, so I make it a point never to worry. Besides," she added defiantly, "I am not fond of steak-and-kidney pie."

"What do you like?" he asked mechanically.

"Peaches and grapes." She glanced smugly at her

hoard in the washbasin. "And French pancakes."

"Exotic. So I must provide you with hothouse fruit all year and a French chef?"

Caroline's eyes sparkled. "Will you?"

"No," he replied tonelessly.

A bit put out, she replied pertly, "Well, you will do as you like, I daresay."

"As I like," he echoed thickly. He was caressing her now with both hands. "But as you like also, my little beauty. Show me what you like."

This time, by way of apology, he set out to please himself by pleasing her. And pleased she was, beyond anything she had known before.

IV

When Geoffry woke up in the morning, at first he was aware only of an all-pervasive sense of well-being. He stretched luxuriously, and slowly allowed himself to become conscious of where he was and in what company. "Carrie," he said quietly, reaching for her.

She wasn't there.

With an eery recollection of last night's impression she might vanish, he opened his eyes and shouted, "Caroline!"

He heard the squeak of a chair on the balcony and she appeared forthwith. Thrown about her shoulders was a practical dark red woolen dressing gown he vowed instantly to replace.

"I meant to save you half the peach, but I'm afraid it's all gone. Here are some grapes, though." Caroline padded over in her bare feet and put a grape in his mouth.

He made her sit on the bed and put his head on her lap while she fed him grapes and told him about the sea and the people she had seen on the promenade.

"Is it warm outside?" he wanted to know.

"Very. Much too warm for my dressing gown, which is why I've not got it on properly. But I promise you, Geoff, I've sat well back from the railing and no one has noticed me."

Not considering how uncharacteristically demure this was, Geoffry said around a grape, "I'm going to buy you a new dressing gown today. Something light, lots of frills and nonsense."

Caroline refrained from showing any elation. "I know why you say that," she laughed. "It is because you selfishly do not wish to look at me in this one."

"Not at all," he lied politely. "But that is a cold-weather dressing gown, and as we do not wish the weather to turn cold, we must not tempt fate."

"How charitable you are!" She laughed again, showing she did not believe him. "I shall love a new dressing gown." She kissed him lightly and changed the subject. "What does one do in Brighton of a Monday morning—or perhaps it is afternoon by now."

Geoffry was skeptical. "Afternoon? It can't be. My watch is on the little table in the other room."

She went off in search of the watch, leaving her dressing gown behind. As she passed the window, the thin lawn of her nightgown went transparent and Geoffry began to wonder if he mightn't have taken more advantage of that light kiss. But when she returned, all such thoughts were immediately driven out of his head.

It was Caroline's self-appointed task, she had decided as of this morning, to teach him how to really throw back his head and laugh out loud. She strode into the room in a very fair imitation of his own brisk walk, with her hair

pushed up under his tall silk hat and his walking stick in one slim hand. With the other hand she drew his watch out of an imaginary watch pocket and said, "The time is half past twelve, Geoffry," with exactly his own intonation.

He shouted with laughter.

"Minx! You must not mimic me! You will quite destroy my self-conceit."

"Oh, I doubt that," Caroline returned drily, and he chuckled.

"You look splendid in a man's hat," he told her, sitting up. "Many women wear men's hats to ride, but they look quite ghoulish."

"To ride? You should see what I wear to ride; you would forbid me to go near a horse! But then, I have only ridden with George and Tommy since I left Warwickshire. There I rode astride like a boy, and everyone looked down their noses. I was a dreadful hoyden!"

Geoffry could imagine. "You ride, then? I had not thought you would."

She nodded. "I know. A shopkeeper's daughter, neither peasant nor lady—how should I have learned to ride? But I wanted to ride, and since I couldn't become a lady, I became a peasant when I had to, and be damned to them all!"

She had a moment's apprehension when she heard herself swearing, which she had not allowed herself to do in Geoffry's presence before, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Riding is one of the most entertaining things about Brighton. One can hire a horse and disappear for hours. There are the Downs and the beaches—marvelous countryside. Somebody called the Downs depressing; said you'd hang yourself for melancholy, but you can't find a tree to tie the rope to. It was Dr. Johnson, I believe, but I'd take issue with him any day of the week. If you'd find it fun, we can go riding one day, but if you agree with

Johnson, there are plenty of other things to do." He smiled and got up. "After my bath. There's a fatal attraction here: Mahomed's Baths. I go every morning when I'm in town."

He slipped into his dressing gown, which Caroline held for him, and then went out. She wondered how long he would leave her alone.

There was a shout from the other room. "Caroline, what have you done to this bed?"

She started guiltily. "I mussed it a bit. For the chambermaid, you know."

"I'm sure, my dear, the chambermaid will have no illusions." He laughed quietly to himself, and Caroline could hear him straightening things up. " 'Mussed it a bit.' It looks like a troupe of gymnasts was practicing in it."

"No," called Caroline, laughing, "That's what *my* bed looks like."

There was no answer. She had a momentary qualm that he would think it a crude witticism and be offended, but he appeared a moment later, buttoning his shirt. He stood in the doorway and surveyed the bed.

"Quite true," he said. "Quite true."

Over breakfast, they agreed that Caroline should go buy her new dressing gown while Geoffry was at the Baths, he having a bachelor's aversion to shopping expeditions.

"What sort of baths are these?" Caroline wanted to know over coffee and more peaches.

"How many peaches can you eat?" he countered, eying her as she sliced up two and splashed them liberally with cream.

"Innumerable. If only there were strawberries to go with them!"

Geoffry found himself thinking there must be some late

strawberries somewhere and making a note to inquire. Then he chided himself upon his suggestability and reflected that if she wanted strawberries she might request some of the hotel management.

"The baths," he said, "are run by an extraordinary heathen who styles himself Sake Mahomed Deen, although if he is really a sheik, I am the King of England."

"You're not," Caroline giggled. "He is much fatter than you and much older."

Geoffry silenced her with a disapproving glance, but he couldn't help thinking of the king, as the dashing and disreputable Prince of Wales, breakfasting with one mistress or another just down the street and around the corner, as he often had. It was a titillating thought.

"Mahomed," he resumed, "was a surgeon in the Indian army. He has developed a quasi-medical treatment of vapor baths combined with what he calls shampooing, which means that one is first steamed and then pummeled, like some sort of fish fillet prepared in reverse."

"It sounds delightful." Caroline eyed him askance.

"Well, actually, I must admit that the treatment itself is not an unmitigated delight, but one comes out of it feeling so healthy and clean, it's worth it in the end."

As soon as breakfast had been eaten, Mahomed's devotee was ready to be off. Caroline wore her new striped dress, and so, plagued with none of the insecurities of being unfashionably dressed, she prepared to take the air about town. As they walked along Marine Parade, she felt they must make a very handsome pair. Her opinion of Geoffry's looks had always been high, but since last night it had undergone a change. Caroline now felt him to be one of the most attractive men she had ever seen.

They parted at the seaward end of the Steyne, Geoffry heading down toward King's Road, Caroline continuing up toward the Grand Parade to see the sights in the most

famous part of town. Geoffry lifted his hat politely as he left her—as if I were a lady or some fine acquaintance or other, thought Caroline with an inward giggle. All that showed through of the giggle was a brilliant smile. Geoffry went off wondering why he had never brought a girl with him on holiday before.

Caroline, mindful of her manners, walked demurely northward. She kept her eyes lowered as much as possible and tried to concentrate on not swinging her hips too much. But the day was irresistable, and the Steyne so charming, an irregular lozenge-shaped green bordered with some fine houses. Caroline knew that Mrs. Fitzherbert lived in one of them, but she couldn't tell which. Perhaps it was the grand one with the four pillars, or perhaps the littler one with the two-storied portico.

If I had been the king's mistress for years, thought Caroline, I'd have the most stupendous house that ever was. The walls of my bedroom would be covered in pink silk, and I'd have an old-fashioned bed, enormous, with a tremendous white satin canopy and masses of draperies. And pink bows. She considered how a man might feel about profusions of pink bows and decided that perhaps royal blue might be better. She could always put the pink silk in her dressing room. Only it would be a boudoir.

As she walked along, mentally decorating the drawing room and the dining room, Caroline forgot about being demure. She was soon swinging along at her normal gait, glancing about her in a characteristically bright-eyed way. Several of the men who passed her smiled, and she almost, but not quite, smiled back. One, however, who had the temerity to lift his hat, received only a disdainful toss of the head. It wasn't long before Caroline caught a glimpse of the Royal Pavilion to her left, and another few yards brought her to a point where she had a clear view of the magnificent eastern facade. Enthralled, she leaned

against the low stone balustrade, gazing in rapturous astonishment at the fabulous array of arches and minarets and onion domes. It was like something out of a fairy tale, an Arabian fairy tale. Except that the palm trees are so short and spindly, she thought, and laughed to herself.

"Are you laughing because you like it or because you find it ridiculous?" The voice was quiet and cultured, but it was very near her ear, and she started violently.

"Forgive me, miss, for startling you," continued the voice, which belonged to a well-dressed young man with untidy black hair. "May I introduce myself?"

"No!" squeaked Caroline in alarm. "No, don't do that. I mustn't speak to you. I beg your pardon."

She turned round and was about to dash off in a great rush to nowhere in particular. The young gentleman laughed.

"It appears you have a watching harpy lurking behind a lamppost," he observed.

"No," said Caroline. "I mean, yes." She recovered herself enough to explain, "Yes, I am with someone, but no, she is not a harpy. I beg your pardon."

"But let me accompany you," persisted the young gentleman, following her as she hurried to the first cross street she could see.

"No, I. . . . Please don't," Caroline cried. "If she sees you, she will be very annoyed. I beg your pardon." It seemed to Caroline that she had begged his pardon twenty times; it must be very boring to be a decently bred young lady with a mama or a nursemaid or whatever her harpy was understood to be.

"In that case, I will beg *your* pardon," said the young gentleman, who was not a bad sort, and took himself off.

Caroline smiled her thanks, then she bustled round the corner into a fortuitous little shop marked Ladies' Apparel. Another thing to remember about properly

brought-up young ladies, she reminded herself. They don't loiter about hanging over fences. After all, she hadn't been so badly brought up herself at one time. If I'd had my wits about me, I'd have said, "I beg your pardon," just once, with a lot of emphasis on the "beg" and a voice dripping icicles. *That* would have done it!

"Good afternoon, miss. May I help you?" A remotely smiling shop assistant in a rustling black dress reminded Caroline of her errand.

On your toes now, my girl, she told herself.

With a pleasant look, she said, "Good afternoon. I am looking for a dressing gown. It must be just the right dressing gown. I. . . ," Caroline smiled shyly. Her eyes dropped, and a becomingly modest blush spread rosily over her cheeks as she stammered, "I'm soon to be married."

It was over an hour later when she said goodbye all round and tripped out of the door of the little shop, congratulating herself on the success of her maneuver. At the magic word "married" the imposing shop assistant's face had taken on a charmingly fatuous expression, and her smile had ceased to be remote. Soon Caroline was in a back room surrounded by boxes, receiving the advice and opinions of the shop owner, both shop assistants, and the shop owner's daughter who, by an extraordinary coincidence, was engaged to a nice young man about whom Caroline learned more than she could ever wish to know. It took a good deal of discussion and tryings and retryings on, but finally Caroline made her choice. She was promised that the box would be at her hotel within two hours.

Upon leaving the shop, Caroline repaired in some haste to the tea garden where she had arranged to meet her protector. He was tranquilly drinking what appeared to be his second cup of tea, but did not seem unduly displeased

by her tardiness. He recommended sherbet, which Caroline was eager to try. Over a tall, cool glass, they contemplated the newspaper and decided which of the multitude of amusements they must be sure not to miss.

"Mornings are *out*," said Geoffry. "We shall plan nothing for mornings."

Caroline smiled.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent in familiarizing Caroline with the town. They walked up past the Pavilion again and on to admire the domed Turkish-style stables and the municipal buildings, then they meandered down to the sea. Caroline was enraptured by everything, even though she was hopelessly muddled by the tangle of old narrow streets, and somebody splashed mud on her dress as they sauntered down West Street inspecting the shops. Forwards dinnertime they wandered back along Marine Parade toward their hotel, languid with the sun and the sea air and the unconstraint of their new relationship.

When they got to their rooms, there was a large box lying on the side table by the door. "Ooh," squealed Caroline, "it's my wonderful dressing gown!" She gathered up the box and danced round the sitting room, hugging it ecstatically. Geoffry watched with an expression half amused, half impatient.

"Well, let me see it," he demanded finally.

Caroline thrust the big box behind her back in an awkward defensive movement. "Oh, no, you mustn't see it in the box. You must see it on first, for the whole effect."

He was suspicious. "Mm. Where's the bill?"

"Oh, I suppose it's inside the box," she replied airily, edging toward the door of her bedroom.

"And what does the bill say, Caroline?"

"I . . . I'm not sure I remember. I have no head for figures, you know." She gave him an appealing little smile which had no noticeable effect.

"Caroline," he began sternly, looking as though he would wrest the box from her by main force.

"I'll try it on for you," she told him hastily. Then she fled into her bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Geoffry wondered just how much the thing could cost. Of course, there were no doubt elaborate creations that cost hundreds of pounds, but surely Caroline had more sense than to buy anything really outrageous.

After a few minutes, the bedroom door opened a crack. "Geoff?"

"Mmm?"

"You mustn't look until I tell you. Close your eyes or turn around or something. Promise?"

"Caroline, for heaven's sake!"

"Promise! If you won't promise, I won't come out."

There was such a serious, determined note in her voice that Geoffry began to be amused again. Such a fuss over one silly dressing gown! "I promise I won't look till you say," he agreed, closing his eyes and feeling like a fool.

There was a gentle rustle and then a soft, "You may look now."

Geoffry opened his eyes, then he went on to open them wider.

"My God, Caroline." He took two steps toward her, then he stopped. "It must cost *a lot*."

She stood in three-quarters view with her hand on a chair by the balcony. She had pulled her hair down quickly, and its disordered curls tumbled luxuriantly over naked shoulders rising from a deep collar of cream-colored lace. The body of the dressing gown, made of sea green satin crepe, was perfectly plain, close-cut, and self-belted; it depended for its effect on the body of the wearer. The skirt flared sharply from the hips. It was a very handsome dressing gown, and with Caroline in it it

was glorious. It looked, as Geoffry was quick to note, extremely expensive.

Caroline pulled on one golden curl. "It didn't cost so much. Less than a hundred pounds," she teased him, laughing.

"Splendid. What else did it cost less than? Ninety-nine pounds?"

"Yes, that, too."

"Caroline, I warn you, beautiful as it is, if it cost too much I shall return it."

"No, you won't." She walked across the room to the mirror. She watched his reflection. "You don't really care what it cost. You can't think of anything except that it clings to my skin and that you want me. I can see it in your face."

As she spoke, she came slowly toward him. When she got within reach, he grabbed her arms, pulled her close against his body.

"Damn you," he murmured. "How right you are."

"We'll miss dinner," said Caroline.

"To hell with dinner."

Some half an hour later, Geoffry rolled over in bed and announced, "Caroline, I want to see that bill now."

"Thirty-four guineas," she said promptly.

Actually, he was pleasantly surprised. He had been expecting more, but he had no intention of letting Caroline know that.

"Thirty-four guineas," he repeated.

Raising himself on one elbow, he looked at her severely. It was not easy to do, when she lay with her hair tousled all over the pillow, with a hand covering one breast and a voluptuous half-smile on her lips.

"All right, stop it now," Geoffry ordered. "I can only be seduced once in any given fifteen-minute period. Stop looking like that and listen to me."

"Am I looking like something?" asked Caroline dreamily, looking even more so.

"Caroline, you may have the dressing gown, but I want you to know you are not going to bamboozle me like this regularly."

"Certainly not!" she exclaimed, full of righteous indignation. She sat up and incidentally exposed most of her body to the light of day. Geoffry covered her up with the sheets.

"I am not," he went on, "a particularly rich man. I am not yet a middle-aged financial wizard who has made himself a millionaire. I expect to become one, but for the moment I am nothing but a clever young banker with a flair for stocks and a penchant for railways. My expectations in the way of inheritance are negligible; my family is unassuming country gentry. I have got a comfortable but modest income—modest, Caroline. Whatever I make on the Exchange, which may be a lot or a little or, God forbid, a deficit, is not to be counted upon; that is my working capital. At home, I live in a quiet flat of four rooms, three of which are very small. I have a manservant and a woman who cooks and cleans five days out of seven. *Not* a lavish existence. If you choose to remain under my protection when we return to London, you had best abandon any notions of living in the grand style. I will pay your rent and your housekeeping bills, within certain limits that will be set in advance. I will clothe you respectably, but not on a par with that dressing gown. I will not be ruined by you or by anyone. Is that clear?"

Caroline had been gazing at the ceiling with the peculiarly vacant look of a child receiving a scolding. "I bought something else," she said.

Her lover's face took on a pained expression. He wondered if she had been paying any attention at all. Well, he thought grimly, we shall see. Whether she takes me seri-

ously or not, I mean every word. If she threatens to be too expensive, I shall drop her without a qualm.

"What else did you buy, hussy?" he asked, and was pleased to see a flash of annoyance in her face.

The flash disappeared immediately. "You'll approve of this purchase," Caroline promised. "It's a length of green taffeta to make into flounces for my yellow dress. The dress is too short, and if I take off the old trimmings, I can add a green sash and a couple of flounces round the hem, then that will be one dress I shan't be obliged to replace. In fact, I think I'll start now."

She jumped up, but she was pulled back and kissed apologetically.

"What more did you buy, pretty Miss Dancer?"

"I bought you a present."

Actually Caroline had bought it for herself, but it seemed like a good moment to press her advantage. She jumped up again and pulled a long rolled paper out of a drawer. Sitting down on a pillow, she smoothed the bedcovers to spread the paper.

"It's a map," she informed Geoffry unnecessarily. "An old map of Brighthelmstone in 1779. You see, with a frontal view of the harbor. And here is where we are now, and here is where the Pavilion is, only then it was—I can't tell, some sort of buildings. And east of the Steyne, it's nothing at all, just fields and a track or two! Marine Parade and all this grand part, just nothing!" Caroline seemed to take a personal pride in the fact that the place she was visiting had been nonexistent half a century before.

Geoffry was as charmed as she was, and they spent several minutes pointing out various places, old and new, and exclaiming over how the town had grown since the Prince had made it the vogue.

"That's your present," Caroline concluded, rolling it up again and tying a ribbon round it as it had been tied

before. She handed it over with a smile. "It didn't cost thirty-four guineas, but I did pay for it with my own money." The last of my own money, she commented wryly to herself.

Geoffry took the map and laid it on the floor beside the bed. "I think we are in a new fifteen-minute period now."

Caroline laughed. "What a lascivious nature you have hidden away behind all that neat-and-tidy propriety of yours!"

"If that is a polite demur," he told her, "I'll lay odds I can make you change your mind inside of three minutes."

"It wasn't a demur, but I've half a mind to say it was, just to see what you'll do."

"Done! What odds?"

Caroline sighed happily. "Don't signify. I'm sure to lose."

"You see, moppet, you are a voluptuary, too. How well suited we are!" he observed, as he covered her torso with a slowly descending line of kisses.

"I wasn't before," she informed him. "It's only you."

"You flatter me. Do continue." His voice was muffled.

"No, it's true. It was not the same at all. I used to . . . hang fire, so to speak."

He looked up. "Invariably?"

She nodded. "I thought how men seemed to make such a great fuss over nothing. So I thought it must be different for men, and so it is, I daresay, but not . . . not so much different as I thought."

Geoffry sat up. "Made a great fuss, did they?" he muttered.

She looked at him curiously. "Do you imagine I have had a great many lovers, Geoff?"

He looked away. "I hadn't thought about it." It was obvious he had thought about it.

Caroline put out a hand to touch his hair. She played with it absently for a few moments, gazing off into space, before saying, "Would you like to hear a story, Geoff?"

"If you like to tell it."

Caroline nodded slowly. After a short pause, she began.

"Once upon a time there was an apothecary in a small town in the middle of England. It doesn't matter which little town, just a little town. This apothecary, who was a jolly, round sort of man, had a wife who was neither jolly nor round, but quiet and pretty, and she sang, not very well, I don't think, but well enough. Both of them worked hard in the apothecary shop, grinding and mixing and making powders. They didn't earn much money, but they had enough to live on in a modest sort of way, and they had enough so that their little girl (they had a daughter) could go to school to learn reading and writing and doing sums.

"One day when the little girl was about seven years old, six or seven, about that, and had just been presented with a baby sister, the apothecary read a newspaper which told him that the Duke of Wellington, who was everybody's hero, and the Prince Regent, who was doing a better job at regenting than the apothecary had ever thought he would, were calling upon all able-bodied men to volunteer for the army. It appeared that a wicked man named Boney had escaped from prison and was starting a big war in Europe, all over again. Well, the jolly round apothecary thought it was his duty to go, because he was an able-bodied man, and that was what was needed. So he went and he was a soldier, and he fought at a place called Waterloo. There was a victory, so he came home. He wasn't as able-bodied when he came back as he was when he went away, so there was more work for the whole family to do in the apothecary shop.

"So the elder of the two little girls left school and took

care of the younger. Life went on pretty well. Until one day the two little girls came back from a jaunt in the woods to find that something in the shop had exploded. The jolly round apothecary was dead, and his quiet pretty wife was dead, too. So the two little girls, having nowhere else to go, were packed off to their aunt, the apothecary's maiden sister.

"Now the younger of the little girls was only five at this time, so she forgot pretty quick about life in the apothecary shop, and she got on tolerably. But the elder girl was more like eleven or twelve. She hated her aunt, and she hated the stuffy little house in the ugly little village outside Birmingham. She was a troublesome brat, forever misbehaving and running away. But she was thought very pretty, and by the time she was seventeen or eighteen she had several suitors, in spite of her reputation as a little monster.

"The first of these in point of consequence was Stirling Bascombe, the squire's son." Caroline paused and slipped into the first person. "The only conceivable objection to Stirling was that his intentions were not honorable. He repeatedly offered my aunt £150—Stirling was rich—for the privilege of introducing me into womanhood, but marriage was out of the question. The second suitor was the draper. He did offer marriage, and I was considered not only perverse but certainly stupid and possibly not quite in my right mind when I refused to have anything to do with him. He was relatively well-to-do and highly thought of, but he smelt of boiled cabbage and he was forever grabbing at me with his fat greasy hands and I *hated* him." Caroline shuddered.

"Boiled cabbage," murmured Geoffry. "Sounds a seductive swain indeed."

"He was nauseating," declared Caroline. "I even think my aunt might have forgiven my refusing him, but

the third earnest suitor for my affections was an unexceptionable young man, and I wouldn't have him either. He was the chemist's apprentice; everybody said how nice it would be, my knowing about such things from my father. Mr. Hadley was perfectly kind, perfectly pleasant, and perfectly boring. I have never since met anyone so entirely, unremittingly boring. The only unboring thing about him was that he liked me. I was half inclined to take him, because I thought he might turn out better than I expected, so I let him kiss me once, which he did in the most inconceivably phlegmatic way. It was fabulously boring. I daresay it wasn't so boring to him, because he thereafter redoubled his efforts to make my aunt make me marry him, but I wouldn't, so he married somebody else, which reassured me that his heart was not broken. I saw her shortly before I came to London. She was 'out to here' with another Mr. Hadley, and she looked bored to death. Poor Mr. Hadley, he's even boring to talk about."

Caroline sighed and Geoffry laughed.

"So, in despair, I suppose it was in despair—we'll give her the benefit of the doubt—my aunt sold me to Stirling."

"No!" cried Geoffry, sitting up straight and not laughing any more.

"She did." Caroline nodded vigorously. "She bargained him up to two hundred and added a rider to the effect that when he was done with me he would see that I was cared for. I agreed to it." She shrugged. "My God, it was better than any of the other possibilities."

Geoffry could see her point.

"So I left my sister Georgia—Caroline and Georgia, isn't it sweet and patriotic? I left Georgie playing the piano, which is her great passion and which, in fact, was bought with some of Stirling's money—she'd been practicing on a dreadful wheezer at the church—and I went off with Stirling, who at least did not smell of boiled cabbage

and was not boring. He was very romantic, dark and painfully thin, with pale white skin and a heart-rending cough, which was not an affectation because he was consumptive. The only uncomfortable thing about Stirling. . . . Are you tired of hearing such a long story?''

Geoffry got up and put on his sandcolored dressing gown, feeling just the slightest bit uneasy.

''Of course I am not tired of hearing your story. I'm touched that you should tell it to me.''

He brought her a glass of sherry, although she would have preferred the brandy he was drinking. He sat down on the bed again.

''So what was uncomfortable about Stirling?''

Smiling as she took the glass, Caroline put her lips to it and gazed thoughtfully over the rim. ''Stirling . . . had a problem. He made a great point to my aunt about my being a virgin. My aunt swore to him that I was, because I swore to my aunt that I was. In point of fact, I wasn't so sure, because I didn't have a very clear notion about such things, and I had been friends with a shepherd on some of my rambles. But when I got scared and stopped being friends with him, he swore to me I was still virgin. Everybody seemed to do a great deal of swearing on the subject. At any rate, when it came to Stirling, it was just as well there had been some trailblazing, as it were, because Stirling was . . . not strong. You see, he was inspired by virgins, but as a general rule, though he might be as enthusiastic as anybody in his mind—''

''You needn't elaborate,'' broke in Geoffry drily. ''I am familiar with the symptoms of impotence.''

Caroline opened her eyes very wide. ''You are?'' she squeaked in tones of utter amazement.

''Not personally. By repute.''

''Oh, I see,'' replied Caroline. There was a twinkle in her eye, which to a more perceptive observer might have

implied that she had been perfectly aware of his meaning all along. But Geoffry was not observing. He was busy keeping his countenance in the face of all these revelations.

"Impotence," Caroline resumed. "I knew there was a polite way of saying it. Well, that was Stirling's problem. So you see, the first time it was all very well, but after that. . . ." She shrugged and laughed.

Geoffry found himself disliking Stirling intensely. He drank a little more of his brandy.

"I daresay it's unkind of me to laugh, but really, Geoff, it was comical! We had to go to infinite pains to get him to straighten up even enough to—"

"*Spare* me the graphic details!" exploded Geoffry, banging down his glass so that the brandy jumped up into the air and slopped over his hand onto the table. He had intended both the words and the gesture to be coolly satirical and was much put out at his unexpected vehemence.

Caroline gave him exactly the coolly satirical stare he had meant to give her. "I beg your pardon, miss," she said mincingly. "I did not realize you were a young person of such delicate sensibilities."

Thoroughly embarrassed, he battled with an impulse to get up and pace round the room. He surreptitiously wiped the brandy from his fingers onto the sheet. "It isn't a question of missishness," he began in a pompous tone.

"*I* know what it is," she snapped. "It's a question of male vanity. How can you be so tiresome? Should I object if you were to tell me about the other women you have had? I should be much diverted! If you had had none, I should think you were peculiar. But you, as a man, would be charmed if I had never had any man but you, even though you have taken me as a kept mistress. How selfish

you are! If I had thought you would be so unpleasant, I should never have told you a thing about it!''

It was a nicely choreographed display of temper, and Geoffry had to acknowledge the truth of the accusation. He both profited by her status as a Cyprian and resented the fact that she was. And for all he firmly believed Stirling to have been an unconscionable rogue, he would have liked to have been in his place.

''Well, go on. Just grant me a little less meticulousness of detail. You managed to satisfy Stirling, one way and another, until what?''

Her eyes danced with mischief. ''If you like, I'll show you some of the things he taught me. I daresay you know a good many, but I'm sure there are others. Stirling could be quite inventive!''

Looking like a thundercloud, Geoffry finished off his brandy.

Caroline laughed. ''Why do you let me roast you, silly man? Don't glower so! It is very gratifying to see you are jealous.''

She smiled at him until, reluctantly, he smiled back, and then she went on.

''Stirling was very fond of me, and he kept me for nearly a year. Squire Bascombe didn't like it at all—I think he wanted me himself, but after all, Stirling was dying and the Squire didn't like to quarrel with him. Stirling still spent a lot of time maiden-hunting, so I didn't see him all the time. On fine days I rode his horses; on bad days I read the Squire's books. I didn't like Stirling's books. Stirling's books were mostly horrid poetry that made me cry when he read it to me, all very up to date. Lord Byron I could manage; at least I could see what he was saying, and sometimes he was funny. But Keats I couldn't bear; he moped me to death with a lot of damned

Greek I didn't understand, but it made me feel wretched anyway. Keats!" she reiterated in a tone of disgust.

"Anyway, one day Stirling asked me if I should like to go to London and I said I should. He asked if I should be sorry to leave him, so of course I said yes I should, but if he thought it best, I should do what he said, which was exactly what he was hoping I'd say. So he sold me to Warburton. Actually, I think the Squire put Warburton up to it, because Warby was not very plump in the pocket, as you could tell by my seedy lodgings. So that's the end. Warby took me to London. He was kind, but he was very close with me. So I made friends with the people on my street, the Spencers, and Alice Mitchell, mostly. He didn't like them. He said they were low company, which put me in a temper, because after all, I'm hardly high company myself. And he entertained the most ignoble suspicions of George. One day he came in and I was sitting on George's knee, in just a friendly way, you know, and he went into strong hysterics. He called George names, so I took up for George and called the Colonel names, and we agreed in the end to part company. That was about a week before you ran me down in St. Paul's Churchyard."

There was a silence as Geoffry digested the end of the story. Caroline got up and put on her beautiful new dressing gown. She sat in front of the mirror to brush her hair.

"I shouldn't be much pleased myself to see you sitting on George's knee," remarked Geoffry. "He's a grown man, you know."

Caroline shrugged. "He's a baby. Besides, it's ridiculous to think anything about me and George. I wouldn't for any consideration go to bed with George. Business is business, and George is in no position—"

She broke off as the tactlessness of this cavalier observation made itself clear on Geoffry's reflected face.

"—To pay for your services," he finished. "Certainly not at thirty-four guineas a shot."

"It's been more than one," fired Caroline.

Geoffry stood up. "Are we scrapping?" he inquired blandly. "If we are, I think I'll go out."

"I'll go with you," declared Caroline with spirit. "I don't see why we should hang about here with such odiously snippy people as these two."

V

A week later, reluctantly starting on their way home, both Caroline and her protector agreed that their holiday in Brighton had been an unqualified success. Besides spending endless hours in bed, they had ridden, walked, bathed, and generally amused themselves in all sorts of healthy exercises. They had gone to various exhibitions, to picture and sculpture galleries, to the Royal Marine Library, and to several public entertainments, including two concerts, a play, and a modest dancing Assembly which, in spite of its modest character, had warranted the purchase of a new dress for Caroline. Geoffry, privately considering he had run mad, had bought her a number of other pretty things, such as a silk shawl, a pair of embroidered evening slippers, and, to his own horror, a gold bracelet. He justified the shawl on the grounds that it had turned cold one day and the shoes because they were needed for the evening dress. The bracelet he explained away as a gesture of appreciation for the practical, prudent alterations Caroline had done on her old dresses so that they did not immediately need replacing.

"I know I'm deluding myself," he admitted ruefully. "I buy you things simply because you are so charming in them and they delight you so."

"Well," replied Caroline complacently, "you don't want to be quite disgraced by my appearance, after all. We've been out and about a good deal. What I want to know is, if this is the off-season, what must it be like during the season!"

"I don't suppose this is really the 'off' season; it just isn't the fashionable season. Then, there is more of everything, and vastly amusing it is, I daresay, but largely private, of course. Really now, would it make any difference to *us* if the king was receiving at the Pavilion?"

Caroline laughed. "I would give my right arm to go to a dinner party there!"

"If the king were to make your acquaintance, he just might invite you, provided you offered not only your right arm but all the rest of you into the bargain. Let it never be said of the monarch that he lacks an appreciation of feminine beauty!"

Caroline wrinkled her nose. "Even to see the Pavilion in all its glory, I don't think I could manage him. I like my men young and handsome."

"Just keep that in the singular for the time being, won't you?" he replied suavely.

It was too bad, but as their carriage rolled smartly northward, their high spirits dissipated, fading slowly, Caroline thought, like the smell of sea salt on the air. Once more they had dinner under the grape arbor, but this time they pushed on for London as soon as they had done eating. Both of them slept fitfully during the last couple of hours of the journey.

As they slackened pace coming into Southwark, Geoffry's face began to take on a certain anxious preoccupation. Metropolitan pressures seemed to descend upon him

like a blanket. Caroline reminded herself that the banker was still there, that the light-hearted lover was no more than one rather minor facet of the man. When they plunged into a traffic tangle just north of London Bridge, he began to evince signs of considerable impatience. He grumbled at being held up when his legs were already in knots from driving all day. As they came to a standstill in the middle of the road, Geoffry spotted a newspaper vendor and called him over.

"Give me today's and yesterday's, too, if you've got one."

The boy handed over one of the papers he was carrying and ran back to his box for the other, pleased to make a sale of what was generally quite unsalable.

Pulling his head back into the carriage, Geoffry mumbled, "Excuse me just a second, while I check something—oh, God." he had turned to the financial pages and was reading what looked to Caroline like a long list of numbers. What was there about a list of numbers that could make him scowl and swear like that, she wondered?

"Dammit," he rephrased, thrusting the paper at Caroline. As she obligingly took it, he plunged into the second paper muttering, "God, God, God," and came up saying distinctly, "God *damn* it; God damn it to hell." He stared straight through Caroline for several moments, then pulled out his watch and stared at that. Finally remembering that she was there, he said, "Caroline, I've got to go somewhere. Goodbye. No, wait."

He leaned out the window across her and yelled for a cab. When it started to make its way across the road, he yelled again for it to stay where it was. Jumping out of the carriage, he ignored Caroline's plaintive queries and told the driver, "Go to—no, damn it, she doesn't live there now. What the hell was the number. . . ! No, damn!" Finally he gave an address on Coleman Street just inside

London Wall and ordered, "Take her there." He poked his head through the window and told Caroline, "I live on the second floor in the front." He fumbled in his pocket for the key and handed it to her. "If the landlady gives you any trouble, tell her to go to hell. I'll be back tonight or tomorrow." As a final thought he added, "If my man's there, his name is Scofield." Then he was sprinting across the street to his cab.

And if your man is not there, is his name then not Scofield? Caroline asked silently.

Geoffry reached his destination in Throgmorton Street five minutes before regular business hours were over. He collared an excessively good-looking young man on his way out.

"Butterfield, you blackguard, this is no day to leave early! Come back in; we need some quiet place to talk."

"Well, well, well. Did you enjoy your holiday, old lad?" inquired Mr. Butterfield. "You seem singularly relaxed and free of anxiety." He allowed himself to be dragged back up the steps and into the building. "Tell me, wizard, what do you know that I don't know?"

"I don't *know* anything, but I definitely feel something. Get us out of this bloody concert hall," Geoffry pleaded quietly, looking round in exasperation at the crowded central foyer.

Mr. Butterfield led the way to a small room. Geoffry pulled him inside and closed the door.

"Those Rajastan shares. They've got to go; the sooner the better. Tonight, if at all possible."

"Go?" Mr. Butterfield raised a beautifully defined black eyebrow.

"They've been climbing like the very devil, I know, but they're going to fall like the very devil, too, Mark. I tell you, that business is not going to last the week. I want

you to sell me out and fast. Tomorrow morning at the latest. It's the Punjabi escapade all over again. What's it done the last week, apart from yesterday?" As Mark quoted the figures, Geoffry grimaced and nodded. "Some sort of rumor is circulating, and in India the odds are a thousand to one it's a bloody lie. Some God-damned nabob is ready to pike with the actual—has done surely by now. We just don't know it yet. But he won't have piked with one damned ha'penny of mine. Or of yours either, if you've got any wits at all. Let me know when you've got my shares sold, and I'll send round a note to Carstairs; I owe him a favor. If those shares aren't gone by noon tomorrow, I'll have your head, Butterfield, you lazy bastard!"

"No need to resort to threats and insults, dear fellow," returned Butterfield, on his dignity. "I can sell them tonight."

"Can you, by God? Mark, you are a gem; you really are. For all that devil-may-care attitude of yours, you get things done."

Mark waved a languid hand in appreciation of the compliment.

"I tell you, Mark, the whole enterprise will be bust by the end of the week. I can feel it in my bones."

"If not till the end of the week, why are you so hot about tomorrow at noon, oh Elijah-the-Prophet?"

"A feeling. Intuition. The whisper of the gods. I don't know. Just sell those shares!" Geoffry's brow had cleared, and he looked at Butterfield with cordiality. "I'll expect you at my lodgings when the thing's done. Ah, no." He changed his mind abruptly. "I'll come round to you."

"Why?" Mark sat up straighter and looked more interested than he had since the beginning of the conversation.

Geoffry gave him a severe none-of-your-business look.

"You've got a girl there! What sort of girl? Some respectable cousin you're afraid to introduce to me? Eh? What sort of girl? Out with it, Price, you prim dog, you!" Mark's enthusiasm waxed as Geoffry's frown deepened. "A pretty girl?"

"Yes."

"A respectable girl?"

"No."

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"By God! Geoffry, I'm proud of you!" Mark informed him with a ringing laugh. "I'll go do your business now and meet you in Ely Place in about three hours. We'll have supper, and you can tell me about this girl."

As they walked through the hall and down the steps, Mark demanded, "Is she fair or dark?"

"Butterfield, hold your tongue," said Geoffry.

"Fair or dark?"

Geoffry obstinately remained silent, and Mark called out cheerily to a passing colleague, "Strafford! You know what Price—"

"Fair," interrupted Geoffry hastily in a low voice. "Very pretty golden hair with blue eyes."

"Never mind," Mark told Strafford. "Tall or short?"

"Tallish."

"Plump or thin?"

"Thin."

"You would like them thin," commented Mark, considering this some sort of aberration. "How did you meet her?"

"Now that is a long story, with which I shall reward you if you get your job done before I perish of hunger," replied Geoffry, and helped his friend none too gently into a cab.

He then started off in a leisurely pace in another direction. He considered going home, but decided against it. You never knew, Butterfield could be back in half an hour, so he went directly to Mr. Butterfield's rooms in Ely Place. The manservant, Bill, let him in, and the time passed rather quickly as they shared a bottle of wine. Mark breezed in after about two hours with a cheerful countenance.

"Here, sir, are your official papers. Please sign. I'll have them countersigned in the morning by the Old Horror. You are now the proud possessor of—" He squinted at the paper. "—Two thousand forty-odd pounds instead of whatever-it-was shares in the Rajastan who's-it."

Geoffry nodded sagely. "That sounds all right and tight from a legal point of view."

The sarcasm was lost on Mark, who nodded also sagely.

"It is, my dear sir, it is. Have no fear of any irregularities in the papers; my legal colleagues are meticulous. Now, if Bill here will forage for victuals, you may begin to tell me the story of the Girl Who Won't Open the Door."

Geoffry sat up. "What do you mean, won't open the door? What door?"

"Why, your door, of course."

"You jackal!"

"My dear fellow," expostulated Mark. "It was all a question of happenstance. I happened to be in the neighborhood, and I happened to pass by the house in which you reside. By merest coincidence, my eye chanced to espy a shape outlined against the curtains. Recalling that you were here and not there, I resolved to take a look round for housebreakers. It was not until I was standing outside your door that I remembered The Girl."

"Of course not," agreed Geoffry.

"Of course not. So, since I happened to be there, I knocked. Suppose it had been housebreakers? She might have been in dire need of assistance."

"Suppose it was Scofield?"

"Wasn't. I know Scofield. Never wears long skirts."

Geoffry said nothing, so Mark resumed. "I knocked, and a throaty feminine voice, splendid voice, said 'Geoff?' I didn't know anyone called you that," he commented aside.

"She does," said Geoffry.

"Ah. Well, I answered 'Yes' in a deep seductive voice very much like yours, I thought. But apparently she didn't think so, for she said straight off, 'You are not, and I shan't let you in, so you may as well go away.' That seemed sensible to me, so I did."

"Good girl," observed Geoffry.

It was quite a lot later when he returned to Coleman Street. The temptations of male companionship, a chance to catch up on business, and another bottle or two of fair wine had conspired to lengthen supper into rather a drawn-out affair.

"Good evening, Scofield," he said briskly as he came into the hall. "I trust Miss Dancer arrived without mishap."

The slightly dazed Scofield replied, "Yes, sir."

"And you gave her some supper, I assume?"

"Of course, sir," said Scofield. "Sir, Mrs. Wakefield—"

"It is none of Mrs. Wakefield's business who is in my rooms," interrupted Geoffry calmly. "When I take to orgies and riots and other such boisterous activities as may do serious harm to Mrs. Wakefield's reputation, then it will become Mrs. Wakefield's affair. Until then, she will keep her opinions to herself. You may tell her that, if you

chance to see her before I do. If not, I shall tell her myself."

"Yes, sir," said Scofield, privately relishing the encounter. On the whole, he thought he would enjoy the telling equally well whether it was he who did it or Mr. Price, just so long as he could be a firsthand witness.

"I hope Mrs. Wakefield did not have the effrontery to embarrass Miss Dancer when she arrived?"

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Wakefield had been out. Miss Dancer had sallied out of her carriage, seen to the unloading of the baggage, and overawed the porter by virtue of her seemingly unshakable composure. She had waltzed up to Geoffry's door and knocked with the key in her hand. When Scofield had opened to her, she had handed him the key, remarking, "Good evening, Scofield. Mr. Price let me have his key, for fear you might have stepped out, but I must say I am glad you are here. I should dearly love a cup of tea." Even Scofield, who knew perfectly well he had never seen this dazzling female before, was nearly convinced she must be some relative of Mr. Price's with whom he, Scofield, was on terms of cordial acquaintance. Ordering the porter to put Geoffry's bags in his room and her own in the hall, Caroline had proceeded to take off her hat and sit down in the sitting room as if she were quite in the habit of being there. She had left Scofield to tip the porter, not so much out of parsimoniousness as out of a total ignorance of what was due him. As soon as the porter had gone and Scofield had brought her tea, Caroline had introduced herself with laughing eyes and had told Scofield he was a very good fellow not to give her away.

Geoffry, upon hearing the story, agreed. "So you are, Scofield." He appeared much amused.

Scofield was quite at a loss and half expected to be told that Miss Dancer was in fact a relative. Gorgeous golden-haired mistresses simply did not accord with Scofield's

private picture of Mr. Price. "I assumed, sir, that since she had your key and your baggage you must have sent her. Naturally I did not want to make any unwarranted difficulties. Mrs. Wakefield came up some time ago to inquire, but I told her only that the lady was your guest. She seemed very disturbed."

"Well, she'll just have to be disturbed for one night. I daresay she will scold tediously in the morning, but it can't be helped. We shall want breakfast early, Scofield. I must conduct Miss Dancer to her own lodgings before I go to work."

"About an hour early, sir?"

Considering, Geoffry nodded. "Thank you, Scofield. Good night."

Scofield, retiring to his room as slowly as was consistent with discretion, had time to see Mr. Price cross the sitting room to where Miss Dancer lay sleeping at one end of the sofa. Scofield paused, confident his employer would not look round. Mr. Price reached out to shake the sleeping form by the shoulder, hesitated, then stooped to pick her up bodily in his arms. Miss Dancer stirred, opened her eyes briefly, nestled her head against his shoulder. Mr. Price, carrying his lovely burden with ease, then made for his bedroom, as did Scofield, shaking his head in unabated astonishment.

In the morning, Scofield awoke to wonder if, when he called Mr. Price at six instead of seven, he would receive a restrained rebuff and find that Miss Dancer had been entirely a figment of his imagination. But in the event, Miss Dancer proved to be anything but a figment, creating an extraordinary atmosphere of frivolity and playfulness in the ordered bachelor quarters and wreaking unintentional havoc upon the well-established breakfast routine. Somehow both Mr. Price and Scofield survived this disruption, and the lady, her bandboxes, and her escort

departed for her new lodgings shortly before eight o'clock.

The landlord, a rotund little man of professionally affable mien, affected to believe in the convenient fiction that his new tenant was some sort of relation of Mr. Price. Mr. Price, true to his principles, had not actually informed him of this, but had fostered the impression by the use of such terms as "responsibility" rather than "protection." Caroline, of course, gave the matter little thought. She was much more interested in the lodgings themselves, in Greville Street, Holborn, well out of the insalubrious complex down by the river where she had lived before.

Her new residence consisted of a pleasant suite with an eastern exposure, so that the morning sun flooded in all along one side. There were several rooms decently if not lavishly appointed. The miniscule hallway boasted a mirror, a table, a small chair upholstered in a bizarre shade of green velveteen. It was a dark little entryway, but it was definitely a vestibule, which impressed Caroline. Halfway down the hall on one side a door opened into a sunny, square sitting room, curtained in pale buff and draped in warm beige. A reasonable carpet in a floral pattern covered most of the dark floor; there were no worn patches visible. Caroline thought she could make the part of the floor that showed shine splendidly if she were willing to give it a good coat of wax and an hour or two of hard work. The furniture, too, wanted a bit of attention, but it was in itself not objectionable: a large, probably hard sofa, a less hard easy chair, two or three little tables, a bookcase (empty), a writing desk in a pretty pirated Adam design, and one very self-important gas lamp. There was a serviceable fireplace in one wall, next to the door which led to the bedroom. This might have seduced one into imagining there would be a fireplace in the bedroom, but there was not. The bedroom was an old-fashioned, low-

ceilinged chamber with a bit of incongruous austerity about it. It was simply furnished with a diminutive mirror and a washstand at one end by the window, a sleeping alcove at the other end, and a plain wooden chair with a plain wooden wardrobe in the middle. Caroline wondered if the landlord would let her paint them. Somebody had apparently had a similar mind to brighten up the room, for the window and bed curtains were of patterned chinz in lively spring colors, and there was a delicate pink stripe on the porcelain. Glancing at the bed, which was wide and boxy and fitted snugly into the alcove, Caroline could not resist giving her lover an impish glance.

"Is it comfortable?" she asked.

"Of course. I lay down on it and rolled about a bit to find out."

Caroline giggled. "Was the landlord shocked?"

"The landlord was suitable impressed by the thoroughness of my examination," Geoffry said with a ghost of a smile.

On the other side of the hall, there was a door toward the front into a small, neat room which might have been a second bedroom, a parlor, or a dining room. It was at the moment fitted out rather as a compromise: a settee and a tea table were at one end, a gateleg table was flattened against another wall opposite a nondescript cabinet, and several straight chairs were scattered about. Caroline vowed immediately to remove the settee and open up the table for a proper dining room. A dining room, to Caroline, was the beginning of luxury. This impression of luxury, however, was dissipated as she gave a cursory glance to the rest of the apartment: the kitchen, pantry, and a couple of tiny rooms opening onto a rickety flight of steps down to the rather dismal court behind the building. Still, Caroline reminded herself, it was all hers.

"I daresay," remarked Geoffry as the tour was com-

pleted, "you'll want some help; I've reckoned that into the housekeeping money."

She shrugged noncommittally. She had already made up her mind to do the housework herself, except the laundry, which she would take out. Her self-protective instincts had been aroused as soon as the subject of money had come up, and she was fully intending to save every penny she could. She knew Geoffry would not like to think of her doing the menial tasks, so she had made up her mind simply to tell him she had help in the mornings, when he wasn't there. She had never had to keep up a place so large, but she was sure she could manage it.

"When will you come?" she asked, watching him collect his hat from the hall table and put it on at an impeccably tasteful angle of precisely five degrees.

"I'll be round this evening to see you're settled in. Look here, would you like me to send round Scofield this morning?"

Caroline rather wondered if Scofield would like it, but she accepted the offer with alacrity.

"We shall be neat as a pin," she promised with a gay laugh. "Never such a mess as the first day you came to tea in Carter Lane! It is hard when one has two nasty rooms; one hates to give them the time to be tidy. But here I shall keep all sparkling—you'll see!"

"The first day I came to tea," he repeated, catching her in his arms. "Carrie, there were shoes on the chair and stockings in the teacups; I never saw such a business!" He laughed and then, sobering, rubbed his cheek against her hair. "How I wanted you from that very first day—from the very first moment when I held you in my arms in that shocking way on the street corner . . . just like this, only with your bonnet crushing my shirt collar and cutting into my neck."

He released her after a moment, reluctantly, then de-

parted for the City, leaving Caroline alone to survey her new domains with blissful satisfaction. At first she was tempted to unpack her boxes, but she decided on second thoughts to wait for Scofield. Calculating the quickest he might arrive, she thought she had time enough to dash out for flowers. On her way she got involved in exploring the neighborhood, over which hung the faintly ponderous atmosphere of the nearby legal eminences. Caroline made a mental note to make friends with one of the gatekeepers and get inside one of the Inns of Court for a good look round someday, then she hurried home with an armful of wildly extravagant peonies, arriving only moments before Scofield knocked politely on the front door.

Caroline had been uncertain how he would take the order to go help establish his employer's mistress, but it turned out that Scofield was too much intrigued by the lady herself to worry excessively about the proprieties of the thing. He and Caroline were soon on the most amicable of terms. Scofield located a charwoman, recommended by the landlord, and together the three of them fell to—brushing, dusting, scrubbing, waxing, polishing, until the indefinably disagreeable aura of furnished rooms had been dispelled to Caroline's satisfaction. The charwoman, paid an amount which Caroline considered lavish, was then dispensed with, and Scofield was subjected to a regular orgy of furniture rearrangement. Having tried every conceivable variation at least twice, Caroline at last pronounced herself well pleased, and added the crowning touch, in the form of the two vases she had got from Stirling: the Sèvres on the dining table with one pink peony and one white, and the Chinese piece, filled with the rest of the peonies, on the bookcase in the sitting room.

It was after nine o'clock before Geoffry appeared. Caroline, bathed and dressed in her rose-and-cream stripe, had found out from Scofield that he generally came home

somewhat before seven, and had dashed about frantically to have everything ready by that time. She had got herself up in her best, ready to celebrate, and then had sat, getting angrier and angrier, for two full hours. By the time the knock sounded at the door, she was glaring at an unread page of a novel. She flounced to the door, flung it open, and was unexpectedly seized in a vigorous one-armed embrace and soundly kissed on the mouth which had been open to demand indignantly where he had been. With the hand which was not around her waist, he closed the door, deposited his hat and stick on the table, and brandished a bottle of what turned out to be champagne. Geoffry had spent the last two and a half hours round the corner in Ely Place disposing of some similar bottles.

Breathless and laughing, Caroline squirmed out of his embrace.

"What *is* it, Geoff?"

"It is you, madam," he replied with a flourish. "The very thought of you intoxicates me! And then—one glance at your lovely face, one breath of your perfume. . . . What perfume is that? Did I give it to you?"

"It's called Sea Breeze, and you bought it in that little shop on the pier."

"Sea breeze, sea breeze," he hummed cheerfully, swooped into the dining room, commandeered two glasses from the cabinet, and began to search fruitlessly for a corkscrew.

"You're drunk," pronounced Caroline astutely.

"I? *I*? I assure you, ma'am, I am never drunk. I am, upon occasion, and this might possibly be one such occasion, somewhat less or more than sober. But I am not drunk. Here." He thrust a newspaper at her. "Read this."

He disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, swearing mildly and inventively. Caroline read a lot of unintelligible words about Rajastan and many thousands of

pounds lost and scandal. She looked up as Geoffry came back in.

"What does it mean?" she asked in some trepidation.

"It means," he told her, "that I am one clever bastard. It also means that I made a lot of money yesterday that I should have lost if I had waited till today." He shuddered. "These East India things are hard on my nerves. Look sharp, the cork will fly."

The cork did fly, bouncing off the ceiling and landing on the floor at Caroline's feet. She picked it up, frowning slightly.

"I don't understand. How does it make you money if Nawab Somebody vanishes into the Himalayas with hundreds of thousands of pounds?"

"Pretty ignoramus, I had shares in the company of which that scoundrel was the director, and I sold them, *yesterday*, for two thousand forty-six pounds ten shillings and eightpence—taxes make the odd numbers—which represents a profit to me of approximately one hundred and fifty per cent over my original investment *and* if I had waited till today I should have lost it all. Ha!"

Laughing, he poured champagne.

"Who did you sell to?"

He shrugged. "My stockbroker saw to it. Some poor devil is doubtless ruing the day." He raised his glass. "Drink, pretty child. . . ." He lowered his glass. "That was a perfectly divine kiss out there. Come give me another."

"You are drunk." Caroline was tolerantly amused.

"No. No, I am pleased." He smiled. "To pleasure! No . . . to happiness," he amended. "Happiness!"

Her long, exasperating wait forgotten, Caroline drank, thinking that happiness seemed now more nearly within her grasp than ever before in her life. She did wonder momentarily how long happiness might last, but for the

present a bottle of champagne and a strong arm around her shoulders were happiness enough.

"It isn't so much the money," Geoffry explained, walking with her to the sitting room, "although I can't say two thousands pounds isn't still a very significant sum to me. What's more important is the flair." His eyes lit up, and he talked into the distance. "Of course one needs solid information. I work damned hard getting that! But the crucial factor is the instinct. If one has not the nose for it, fully half the drudgery is a waste of effort. Better to be a cabinetmaker or a schoolmaster or, God knows, a clergyman like my father. But I *have* got it! I can smell rottenness in a stock. I can feel it, as a sailor can feel there's a reef beyond the next swell. Well, by God, there is no reef beyond this swell!" He brandished his empty glass for emphasis. "This one is going to take me a long way. I needed that money. I needed just enough capital to give me weight with—" He broke off with the instinctive reticence of the shrewd businessman, and then he noticed that Caroline had very wide blue eyes fixed on him in fascination. "You think I'm out of my mind? You're wrong! I shall be a rich man one of these days." He poured another glass and drank. "A very rich man."

"You're really very ambitious, aren't you?" Caroline thought of the hard, fierce look that was just now fading from his face.

He smiled. "Oh, yes. But that's enough about me. Let's talk about you. I think I might be able to spare enough of this windfall to buy you a rather pretty present. What would you like, moppet?"

Never at a loss in a situation like this, Caroline said, "I know what I want! I know exactly what I want most in the world!" She clasped her hands in front of her mouth and bounced in her chair, beseeching him with her eyes. "But I'm afraid it costs too much."

"If it costs too much, I shall tell you to think of something else," he replied, unconcerned.

"You have nothing at all of the grand manner," pouted Caroline. "If you did, you would say, 'For you, my angel, nothing costs too much.' "

"For you, my angel, nothing costs too much," he parroted, "But there are a number of things that cost more than I am willing to pay."

She made a little moue of resignation, then she began to plead again with her eloquent, shining eyes.

"Well, out with it. What do you want more than anything else in the world?"

"A horse," she breathed dreamily.

"A horse?" he echoed, taken by surprise. "A particular horse?"

"Just any horse. A pretty one, a kind one, with spirit. For my very own."

He eyed her expressionlessly.

"Horses require tackle and stabling and feeding, not to mention clothes for the rider. I might see my way clear to providing you with a horse, but what would you do about the rest?"

Caroline sighed.

"That's why I was afraid it would be too expensive. I could stable it with Mr. Spencer and make my own clothes, except boots, of course. But then there's still all those other things. But oh, Geoff, I do so long for a horse!"

She came and sat on his lap; he pulled her close.

"Too extravagant. How about some lovely railway stock instead?"

"Oh, Geoffry!" cried Caroline.

"Something else, then." There was a laugh in his voice.

"I don't want anything else." She pulled his head

round to kiss his mouth and his moustache. "Don't say no right away, Geoff. Say you'll consider it. Please. Please?"

"Do you think you can cajole me with kisses?" he asked with mock severity.

"Mm," replied Caroline. "It's worth a try."

"Amen," said Geoffry.

An hour or so later, Caroline, left alone in her bed after he had got up and gone home, dreamed of herself in a handsome riding habit atop a beautifully mannered little mare—sometimes a grey, sometimes a chestnut, most often an elegant bay. She rode flawlessly through Hyde Park, and all the accumulated gentlefolk wondered who she was and admired her. But Caroline cared nothing for them, only for her horse. And perhaps, because it was only polite, she cared also for the fair gentleman who rode beside her.

So far as the fair gentleman was concerned, however, it seemed that the horse had been forgotten. He came to Caroline next day, and they spent the evening playing piquet and discussing a number of things, but he never mentioned again the present to come out of the two thousand pounds. Caroline was reluctant to give up her dream of a horse, but she acknowledged to herself the strategic advantage of letting him have a chance to think it over without being teased and badgered. With difficulty she held her tongue, and by next day she had quite lost heart. Still, exhibiting characteristic determination, she forced herself to think of something else and went to see George and Tommy Spencer.

When Geoffry appeared unexpectedly for tea in the middle of the afternoon, she was so much interested in telling him the details of her visit that she didn't think twice when he rather hurried his tea and suggested she

accompany him down to the street door to finish the tale she was telling about Alice's new job. She assumed he was in a rush to get back to the bank.

At the doorway he stopped, leaning on the railing and remarking casually, "This is really quite a pleasant street. There's a pretty little square round the corner up toward Gray's Inn. Have you been there yet?"

Caroline glanced westward.

"Oh, yes. I've been all round. It's much nicer here than where I lived before. Quieter, more space, less smell. I like it very much."

"Do you see anything particularly interesting about this street?"

There was a peculiar intonation in his voice, and Caroline peered at him uncertainly.

"*In* this street," he amended.

"I see two cats, a man with an applecart, and Mrs. Simpson's little boy minding a pretty chestnut . . . horse?" she concluded, turning suspiciously.

Geoffry gave her his most quelling half-smile.

It was of no avail. Caroline jumped up and down demanding to know if it was for her, and when he admitted he was considering it, she threw her arms around his neck, covering his face with kisses and emitting little squeaks of delight.

"Caroline, I beg you will remember we are standing out in the street," he protested, trying to disentangle himself. It seemed to him that the windows were rapidly filling with curious onlookers.

"Yes, of course."

She let go of his neck, contenting herself with a pat on the cheek. Then she turned round to look at the horse, clasping her hands in front of her and doing a few more little ebullient hops. After a moment she gave Geoffry

another quick pat, then she gazed at the horse for a long time.

She walked slowly up to its head, saying in a quiet, easy voice, "Hallo, darling. You are a very beautiful red-copper horse. You have lovely brown eyes and such long eyelashes!"

When she rubbed its nose, the horse nodded politely. Emboldened, Caroline hugged it round the neck and leaned her face against it.

"I hope you are a patient horse," she told it, "because I am not yet a very accomplished horsewoman, and I shall probably vex you by my mistakes. But I shall learn quickly, you'll see."

She closed her eyes and rubbed her face against the horse's neck. The horse whickered gently. Caroline was enraptured. Geoffry watched, knowing he had a fatuous smile on his face but unable to banish it.

"What's her . . . his . . . name?" Caroline peered round the horse in a manner both outrageous and droll for a quick verification. "Her name."

"That's Penny," said Geoffry.

"Penny? Your Penny?"

"Your Penny," he corrected.

She looked over at him a little anxiously. "Really mine? Or mine just to use?"

"I've got her papers in my pocket. I'll sign them over to you as soon as you like."

"Papers." Caroline sighed ecstatically.

It transpired that Geoffry had left the bank for the afternoon, and they spent the rest of the day making arrangements for all those troublesome things that made having a horse so much more expensive than just the price of the horse. Although he admitted that it would be cheaper to stable Penny with Mr. Spencer, Geoffry

objected to this on the grounds that it was too far both from Caroline's lodgings and from the park. A stable in the park would be much more dear, so Geoffry had found a convenient mews within a few minutes walk of Greville Street and had, in fact, already arranged for Penny to be stabled there. Upon arriving at this providential place, Caroline found she was also to receive Penny's old tackle, the quality of which immediately gave away Geoffry's weakness for horses.

"Of course, you can't use my saddle, so I'm afraid I have bought you one. It's decently put together and it should be comfortable. If you have any trouble with it, let me know." He tried to look stern. "I don't promise to do anything about it, but let me know."

Caroline vowed silently that she would be comfortable in this saddle if it killed her, and she would never, never allow herself to think he was tightfisted again. Even when he was.

They were standing in the tackroom looking things over while the ostler hovered curiously in the background.

"What's the box?" Caroline peered under the saddle where it hung on two pegs against the wall.

Geoffry smoothed his moustache sheepishly and bent to pick it up.

"It's another damned thing I bought for you," he muttered.

Caroline watched him open the box to reveal a beautiful new man's black silk hat, garnished with one short, frothy plume of brilliant green. Her eyes alight, she let him lift it out of the box and set it on her head at exactly the same restrained angle he wore his own hat.

Lovers, concluded the ostler. Must be lovers.

"It was that morning last week," murmured Geoffry.

"I couldn't resist. The milliner who put the feather on it for me thought I was a lunatic."

"You mean it's a Price original?" Caroline smiled, but remembered not to coquette too openly.

He nodded. "How do you think I'd do as a fashion designer?"

"Help me design my habit, and I'll give you my considered opinion," she replied.

He did help her, remaining in Greville Street for the rest of the evening and offering such satisfactory suggestions as satin braid for the hem and the jacket. They agreed that frogs *à la militaire* would produce too severe an effect if the habit was to be black, as it must, to go with the hat. They decided upon a jacket cut away to reveal masses of white ruffles at the neck.

"You can really sew this masterpiece yourself?" asked Geoffry, gazing with admiration at the completed sketch.

Caroline was sure she could, and did. She had ample time in the next week for the job, for Geoffry, caught up in business affairs, did not reappear for some days. Caroline made an effort not to feel neglected, reminding herself that he had not appointed to come at any specific time, but nevertheless she kept expecting him at any moment, and time began to hang heavily on her hands. It was Saturday evening when he did come, very late and once again pretty much in his altitudes.

"I have been dining with an earl," he announced, stretching out comfortably. "What do you think of that?"

"I think," said Caroline, "that if it were you who had polished that table, you would not put your great destructive shoes on it."

He lowered his feet to the floor.

"Did I get you up?" he asked, with an eye to her disordered hair and her dressing gown.

"Do you know what time it is?" countered Caroline.

"Time for all sensible people to be in bed," he declared. Standing up and seizing her hand, he led her to the bedroom without more ado.

Caroline tried to stay angry. She tried to preserve a certain aloofness of manner that would indicate her displeasure without really offering grounds for reproach on his part. But then he began to tell her what a busy week he had had, very successful, worth every bit of the inconvenience, but he had missed her so much. He said he knew it was too late to call on her, but he hadn't been able to resist. He had been in his cab on his way home from the West End, and he had thought of her and of his old cold bed in Coleman Street, then he had shouted the driver to a halt and come anyway. And there she was, so pretty, so sweet and warm—

"Oh, bosh," interrupted Caroline. "I don't believe you've never had a woman in keeping before. I think you have five or six mistresses all over London. How else did you learn to talk so?"

But she was charmed all the same, and when later he began to grumble about getting up and going home, she told him he should stay the night.

He thought about it. "Why not? Tomorrow is Sunday; I don't have to go to work. I daresay Scofield will have no trouble divining where I am. Why not? What the hell, I pay the rent, don't I?"

With this endearing reflection, he gave her a friendly pat on the bottom and rolled over and went to sleep. In the morning, enchanted with her newly completed riding habit, he took her to Hyde Park.

It was, Caroline decided, very much as it had been in her dream. They were out a bit early for the really fashionable crowd, but those who were there definitely did notice her. Her horsemanship was not, as in the dream, flawless,

and she was still too uncertain in the sidesaddle to risk a dashing gallop, but Geoffry's offhand comments were helpful and Caroline knew she cut a striking figure in her black habit and her unusual black hat with the green feather providing the only color besides her natural features, the shining gold of her hair, the brilliant blue eyes, and carmine mouth.

She found, as well, that another part of her dream came true: after an initial flash of pleasurable consciousness that she looked well, Caroline gave her full attention to Penny, who was restive but eager to please, and to her escort, who sat his tall brown gelding with effortless grace. Caroline thought that in walking and trotting sedately beside her, both Geoffry and Nightingale were being deprived of a good measure of their enjoyment of the outing, and she urged Geoffry to have a good gallop in spite of her. He demurred, but offered to put Nightingale through his paces. They found a deserted spot and Caroline watched, spellbound, as they performed a spectacular set of figures: steps, turns, strange formal leaps, and even what seemed to be whole dances, concluding with a movement wherein the horse appeared to go straight up into the air and hover while extending his back legs in an elegant little kick. When he came down after this last, Geoffry gave a shout of exhilaration and pounded him on the shoulder. Nightingale cavorted excitedly, as pleased with himself as Geoffry was.

"I didn't know he could do that," Geoffry informed his wide-eyed audience of one as he cantered up. "He never has done before." He laughed. "Showing off for Penny, I daresay. They can't geld away his instincts entirely."

As they rode back quietly along Rotten Row, he explained that Nightingale had been trained by an admirer of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. Geoffry had got him because the previous owner, mistakenly

identifying him as a real Lippizaner, had been so chagrined at discovering his mistake that he had sold him at a price far below his actual worth.

"Of course," Geoffry added, "the fellow couldn't ride worth a damn, so he never got the most out of him."

Caroline, acutely conscious of her uncertain seat and her tendency to raise her hands, took refuge in a change of subject and privately vowed to take Penny out for at least two hours every day.

VI

It was a lovely day, that Sunday in the park, but Caroline decided upon reflection that it did not make up for a week of loneliness, especially when she could see it was very likely to happen again. Geoffry got busy; he thought he would come tomorrow; something came up tomorrow—he was tired, he was late; and Caroline was left alone. It was always a good reason, but nevertheless Caroline felt that their living arrangement was, so far, unsatisfactory.

Now, my girl, she told herself, and by the way reflected that she talked to herself too much, you are in the process of becoming a luxury, to be sought out from time to time like an exceptional wine or a new play. This is dangerous. Luxuries are by definition expendable. What you want is to be a necessity, something he will not consider doing without, even if the next Nawab runs off into the Himalayas before he has sold his shares. Once he really needs you, then you will be secure.

Under the influence of this reasoning, Caroline got herself demurely up in a newly remade calico dress, her

best cream-colored gloves, her new hat with the rosy ribbons, and set out one afternoon in the direction of Lombard Street.

It was nearly half-past five when a clerk poked his nose apologetically into one of the back rooms of the sober edifice in which Mr. Price spent his practical and profitable days. "Excuse me, sir. There is a young lady to see you. She says she has no appointment, but asked if I would just see if you'll speak to her. She gives her name as Miss Dancer," he added.

Geoffry raised his eyebrows.

"Charming name," said Mark Butterfield, sitting up a shade straighter in the chair where he was lounging very much at his ease. "Is she an attractive young lady, Stokely?"

Geoffry directed at Mark a quelling glance which had no noticeable effect.

"Did she say what her business was?" he asked the clerk.

"No, sir. I told her you were in conference and pointed out that it is very late in the day. She would not be convinced that a morning appointment on Thursday or Friday would be more suitable."

"Very well, then, Stokely, send her in. And show Mr. Butterfield out," he added firmly as Mark's face began to show signs of anticipation.

Caroline, sitting primly in the antechamber, waited patiently for Mr. Stokely to reappear. When he did, it was in the company of an extraordinarily beautiful man whom Caroline ignored entirely, especially when his eyes widened in approbation and he lifted his hat to her. With precisely the sort of frosty face-front stare she had seen on ladies in the street when accosted by an undesirable, she stood up and followed Stokely down a short badly lit hall to a small dark door, upon which the clerk knocked. Upon

receiving a curt reply, he opened the door and stepped aside for Caroline to go in.

"Miss Dancer?" said Geoffry in a cordial professional voice, standing up and coming round to offer her a chair.

"Mr. Price," said Caroline. "How good of you to receive me upon such short notice."

"Delighted, I'm sure, ma'am. In what way can I serve you?"

By this time Stokely had closed the door and departed with pretty well-disguised reluctance.

"Well, sir," began Caroline, perching on the edge of her chair, "I have got a financial problem on which I was hoping you might be able to offer me some well-considered advice."

"Oh, have you?" There was an ominous note in the tone.

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid I have." Caroline raised limpid blue eyes and folded her hands over her reticule. "It all started this morning."

Geoffry frowned forbiddingly and sat back in his chair.

"It was such a lovely day, you see, I went walking up by the fish market. And there, sir, among all the common halibuts and plaices, my eye alighted upon the most beautiful lobster you can imagine. Well, sir, in a fit of . . . I don't know, call it madness if you like, I purchased this wonderful lobster. A rare find, I do assure you. Bearing my prize in my shopping basket, I returned home, opened my cookbook, and set to work with a will. Heedless of expense, quite drunk with enthusiasm, I prepared a delectable lobster stew, surely the best you ever tasted. *But. . . .*"

Here Caroline clasped her hands together and gazed tragically at her auditor, whose face wore an impassive expression of polite attention. She fluttered her eyelashes. "Sir, I have Come to a Pass."

"Pockets to let," suggested Geoffry.

Caroline fluttered her eyelashes again. "Surely, sir, you cannot suspect me of such wicked extravagance as exceeding my allowance? No, sir, the problem is that I have overextended myself. Having failed to do the proper research into the nature of my investment, I foolishly bought more than I shall be able to dispose of to advantage, and now I find that this particular sort of property cannot be laid away on the shelf for another day; I need someone to take some of it off my hands. In short, if you cannot offer a practical suggestion, the half of my superlative lobster stew is very likely to go to the dogs."

Mr. Price crossed his legs, put his fingertips together, and pursed his lips thoughtfully. After some moments of stern reflection, he nodded his head with growing conviction. "I think I see a way out for you, Miss Dancer," he said.

"Oh, do you, sir?" Miss Dancer leaned forward eagerly.

"It's only a recommendation, mind," he cautioned. "You need not feel obligated in any way."

"Oh, sir, I trust to you entirely!" cried Caroline.

"Invite me to supper."

Caroline's face took on an expression of awe. "Now why didn't I think of that?" she asked.

A few minutes later Mr. Price passed through the anteroom, escorting Miss Dancer out. They chatted amiably and audibly about the weather. Mark, who had been hanging about, found himself determinedly collared by Stokely just as he was about to make for the door in pursuit. Despite low-voiced complaints, threats, and finally curses, Stokely was unshakable, holding firmly to his arm and asking irrelevant questions until Miss Dancer had disappeared and Price returned, wearing a smile that was with difficulty restrained from turning into a grin.

"Let him go before he decides to mill you down, Stokely," said Price. "Butterfield can be pretty handy with his fives, especially when deprived of the chance to chase after a pretty girl."

Stokely relinquished Mark's arm with a neat little bow. He was quite satisfied with the results of his intrusion: Price looked positively tickled. Mark brushed off his arm ostentatiously and straightened his cuff needlessly.

"Price, you are a disgrace to manhood," he said. "*Any*body could have found an excuse to detain her longer than that. She was a damned pretty girl. Who is she?"

"Just another damned pretty girl," replied Price cheerily. "We have lots of them here."

As he turned to go back to his office, Stokely could have sworn he saw Mr. Price wink at him.

"*Wink* at you, Charlie?" echoed his wife incredulously, at suppertime. "Go on, Charlie, Mr. Price never winked at anybody in his life."

"He did, too," asserted Stokely. "She really was," he added with a smirk, "a damned pretty girl."

It would never have occurred to Geoffry that his conduct might have excited comment. He had gone back to his office, leaving a much disappointed Mr. Butterfield to return to the Stock Exchange with a sharp eye out for the vanished Miss Dancer. After twenty minutes of concentrated paperwork, during the course of which he called on an impassive Stokely several times for his usual intelligent, efficient assistance, the proper Mr. Price donned hat and gloves, collected a folio of papers and his walking stick, and left the office, parenthetically thinking kind thoughts about the fates which had seen to the absence of the man who shared his office this afternoon. Price bid

good night to the assorted gentlemen in the anteroom and went out, descending the rather steep stairs to Lombard Street at a brisk clip. He then crossed into Birchin Lane and emerged from the quiet little tea shop on the corner with the pretty Miss Dancer on his arm.

Miss Dancer was in fine fettle. She laughed and told amusing stories—some true, some embellished, some manufactured for the occasion—all the way to Greville Street. Geoffry was so diverted that they were well past Coleman Street before he remembered that he had been intending to drop his papers off at home for attention later in the evening.

"Never mind," said Caroline. "I have a comfy chair, excellent for reading in, and that hideous gas lamp gives off a very good light."

The lobster stew proved to be extraordinarily good, particularly accompanied as it was by a full-bodied but relatively dry white wine. Both the wine and the lobster had been chosen with all due regard for quality and only minimal consideration of expense. While entirely undeceived by the story of the lobster's fortuitous acquisition, Geoffry enjoyed disposing of it. When they had finished eating and repaired to the sitting room, he accepted with satisfaction both a settling glass of port and a rather unsettling kiss.

Caroline had not meant for this kiss to be anything but a feathery expression of good will. Her partner, however, was in the mood for something more substantial, and Caroline, feeling pretty mellow herself, perched momentarily on the arm of his chair. But when he tried to pull her into his lap, she said, "You have your papers to read, Geoff."

"I'll read them tomorrow."

"But you planned to read them today," she objected, discouraging his embrace.

"Carrie, Carrie," he murmured, "I can't read financial papers when you are by."

Since this was precisely the point Caroline was out to disprove, she scrambled to her feet as he began to kiss the lowest part of her décolleté.

"I'll go do the washing up," she decided, ruffling his hair and laughing. "You read your papers." The blue eyes sparkled down at him as she added, "To please your mistress."

"I know how to please my mistress," said Geoffry.

But she skittered away as he reached for her again, and disappeared into the kitchen with a toss of her curls. Smiling, Geoffry settled down and plunged into the first of his reports.

Caroline did not reappear for nearly half an hour. Then she slipped in quietly, refilled his glass of port, and sat down with a book. Geoffry glanced up and then fell again to reading voraciously. Caroline covertly watched how his eyes slipped down the page, sometimes skipping back to the beginning again, then finding their place and moving on with great rapidity. At the end of a page, he would glance back at each paragraph, obviously reviewing in his mind the salient points. In a few minutes he set the first sheaf of papers aside and stared into the fire.

"Would you mind if I took off my coat?" he asked abruptly.

Caroline assured him she would have no objection. She suggested that he might take off his shoes as well, if that would make him more comfortable. Acknowledging the truth of this with a bit of wry smile, he handed her his coat and, setting his shoes side by side under his chair, propped his feet up on the lower shelf of a small table, took his wine glass in hand, and began to read again. He read steadily for another hour, methodically going through the stack of papers beside him. When he finished with one batch, he

would thoughtfully square the edges of the sheets and place the whole collection evenly on top of the stack of things he had already read. A number of papers he perused eclectically, pausing only once in a while to read a section in detail; others he read straight through from beginning to end with a tiny frown of concentration.

Caroline, desultorily turning the pages of the latest sensational novel, was fascinated by this systematic method of study. What did he read? They seemed to be for the most part newspapers and published reports of railway companies, but there were handwritten memoranda also and printed pamphlets that consisted largely of numbers in long columns. She wondered where on earth he got them from. Surely the handwritten memoranda could not be bought at a bookseller's like the pamphlets; they must be circulated privately. Did he read this much every night, she wondered? Did he enjoy it, or was it merely a chore in the greater business of making money? Caroline bit back all her questions and tried to pay attention to her novel, but when Geoffry gave a cynical little laugh at something, she noted the page. When he had laid down the paper, she took it up and tried to see what had made him laugh, but it was a newspaper and she couldn't tell which article he had been reading.

She hadn't thought he noticed her take up the paper, but in a moment he said, "Read this. This is what was happening in Rajastan and why I came so near to losing those two thousand pounds while we were sporting about at the seaside."

Noncommittally, Caroline glanced through the columns he pointed out. None of it made much sense to her. She got the feeling she simply didn't understand any of the basic principles of finance, and she vowed to get a book out of the circulating library, no matter how peculiarly they might stare at her and no matter how many times she

fell asleep trying to plow her way through it. If she was to hold this man's interest she would have to be more than a silly toy for him.

She noticed that the glass he was holding was empty. When she took it from him, he said absently, "Only half, please, Scofield."

It took Caroline a moment or two to remember who Scofield was. Well, really, she thought, she wanted him to feel at home, but that was a bit much!

"Here you are, sir," she said in a cringing, servile tone, not in the least like Scofield, as she put the half-filled glass back into his hand.

Geoffry looked up startled, then his expression cleared.

"Scofield," he smiled, "you've changed mightily. And all for the better, I can tell you!"

Caroline smiled at him. "Will you sleep here?"

He nodded. "Unless you were intending to turn me out."

"I wasn't intending anything," she told him mendaciously. "But if you're staying, I'll just lock up."

"Fine." He was already halfway absorbed in his reading again.

As she shot the bolt on the front door, Caroline pondered the evening's work. On the whole, she was pleased. Supper had been enjoyable, quick, and not too expensive. Geoffry had been made quite as comfortable as he would have been in Coleman Street. He had got just as much work done and no less agreeably. When he came to bed, Caroline would see to it that the agreeable aspects of the evening were reinforced in his mind. In the morning she would make him an excellent breakfast and see to it that he got off to work on time. If she was to effect a major change in his routine, she would have to do it smoothly. He must perceive only benefits from the change, no inconveniences.

It was not long before Caroline achieved her aim. Within a few weeks he had moved in with her. Most of his clothes remained in Coleman Street, but there built up in Caroline's plain wooden wardrobe a handy stockpile of linen for which she gradually assumed responsibility. Her expenses skyrocketed, but Geoffry, never behindhand where financial matters were concerned, was quick to realize this and adjusted her allowance accordingly, for his own expenses, of course, decreased proportionately.

He did not, however, give up entirely his bachelor lodgings. He would repair to Coleman Street several mornings a week for a different coat or another pair of shoes, for some correspondence, or a book from his library. Scofield's duties were much lightened, and he enjoyed inordinate amounts of free time, which he spent largely with his sister and her family and with his aged mother who had been feeling poorly. He even considered getting another job in his spare time.

Mark Butterfield, who lived on Geoffry's route between Greville Street and the City, quickly discovered the change in his friend's life-style. He delighted in it. "What would your papa say?" he intoned piously as they strolled up Cheapside on their way home one evening.

"My papa," replied Geoffry, "would say that it is entirely my own affair."

He smiled. Geoffry was on top of the world. Things were going well for him at work, and he liked to come home to a pretty, amusing young woman who fussed over him, but not too much, served him imaginative suppers, but not outrageous ones, encouraged him to work, but was happy to join him at cards if he preferred, and kept him completely happy in bed. In short, he was being thoroughly spoiled, and he loved it.

The only person who was less than thrilled with the situation was its instigator. Caroline was dissatisfied.

There was a nagging little something at the back of her brain that told her things were not working out quite the way she wanted them to. If she examined the case rationally, it seemed fine. But subrationally, she felt that something was wrong, and she had a feeling it was getting steadily wronger.

In an effort to combat this unpleasant impression, she adopted her usual expedient of throwing herself into new pastimes. On fine days she spent several hours on Penny, sometimes alone, sometimes with Tommy Spencer who, having been entrusted with Nightingale since the trip to Brighton, would often make his wary way up the crowded City streets to meet Caroline, and together they would take either the hectic route down Oxford Street to Hyde Park or the somewhat less harrowing road north to Regent's Park. Caroline found that riding like a fine lady in a handsome habit on a nicely mannered horse was everything she had expected it to be. She got into some bad habits by teaching herself, but Tommy was quick to offer criticism of her form, and on the whole she gained so much relaxed grace from sheer familiarity that the lack of proper instruction was a comparatively small drawback. The experience of having a horse was, for Caroline, a rousing success.

But she could not always be on horseback, and she found herself often at loose ends. She attacked her housework with determination but with an increasing sense of resentment. She had a notion that Geoffry knew her charwoman was fictional, and she illogically decided it was ungentlemanly in him to let the deception pass. However, she had to admit that housework gave her something to do. Besides haunting the circulating library, she took up several sorts of handwork, especially favoring lacemaking because it took time and concentration while allowing for creativity and not requiring much expenditure on materials. She visited her old friends at Ludgate, too, though

some of the easy give-and-take was gone. And she went for long rambling walks, scouting out new places to take Penny and simply exploring in the warm green-and-gold September afternoons.

It was on one of these solitary walks, which had taken her into Westminster to gaze at the blackened Gothic spires of the Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, that she happened to be passing up through St. James's Park, still her favorite, when a delighted male voice behind her cried out, "Miss Dancer!"

Caroline, not recognizing the voice, paid no heed. She continued along the walkway without turning her head, but she did slow her pace just a trifle. As the footsteps drew nearer, she came to a halt and swung round, wearing what she hoped was a haughty glare. The glare melted away when she saw that it was not one but two gentlemen who were bearing down upon her. One was the untidy young man who had spoken to her outside the Royal Pavilion at Brighton: the other was the gorgeous gentleman she had seen in the foyer of Geoffry's bank. It was the latter who had called out her name.

"Why do you shout at me in that rude way?" asked Caroline just for the record. "I am not acquainted with either of you gentlemen."

As she prepared to turn aside, the gorgeous young man sprang to bow in front of her, while the young man from Brighton blocked the path to the rear.

"Surely you haven't forgotten, ma'am?" intoned the gorgeous young man, with a tragic wounded twist to his eyebrows. "We met in the foyer of . . . your bank barely two weeks ago."

Caroline wondered briefly why he did not mention the name of the bank. She decided it must be some nice point of discretion. She was impressed.

"It may be, sir, that you saw me there, but I am quite

sure we were not introduced. I beg you will move aside and let me continue my walk."

There was something indefinable about Caroline's way of delivering this speech that made it less quelling than it might have been.

"If we were not introduced, ma'am, it is merely because I was detained by some trivial matter—and since the matter was trivial, it should certainly not be allowed to stand in the way of our acquaintance."

"Brighton!" cried the other young man.

Caroline swiveled round in some alarm.

"I remember now! I met you in front of the Pavilion. You must recall—you said it made you laugh, and I agreed it was an extraordinary piece of work. John Horton, ma'am, at your service!"

"Mark Butterfield, Miss Dancer, ready to indulge your any whim!"

Both gentlemen bowed. Caroline, nonplussed, looked from one to the other. They certainly were attractive gentlemen, both of them, young, handsome, and tastefully dressed in tall hats, white cravats, dark coats, light trousers. Mr. Horton wore brown with a green striped waistcoat and boots better made than polished. Mr. Butterfield wore black and cream with loose-fitting trousers strapped over shoes buffed to a rich deep shine. Somehow these two impertinent young men had maneuvered themselves into position one on either side of her, and they were all strolling companionably past the Horse Guards.

"I . . . you are exaggerating," protested Caroline feebly. "I don't know either of you."

"But you do! I am Butterfield, and that's Horton." Butterfield made it quite clear that being Horton was a handicap.

"Did you enjoy your visit to Brighton, Miss Dancer?"

put in Mr. Horton. "You seem to have given that harpy the slip."

"Yes," said Caroline. "I . . . it was my aunt, you know."

"In Brighton?" Butterfield gave her a sudden piercing glance. "Are you with your aunt here in London?"

"No," said Caroline. "I mean, yes. That is, she is not quite so strict here at home. She was out for the afternoon and it was so fine I came for a walk. But as a rule I am not allowed to gad about by myself."

"Very prudent," agreed Mr. Horton.

"Nonsense," said Butterfield. "Miss Dancer is a responsible young lady, not a simpering schoolroom miss. I think your aunt sounds a deal too punctilious," he confided to Caroline. "Did she keep you quite hidden away in Brighton? You must have been sadly moped; there are so many amusing things in Brighton."

Oh, yes, Caroline enthused, there had been lovely things to do, and she had not been moped at all; her aunt had taken her everywhere! They had gone to the theater and to a concert of Mozart and to the concerts outdoors in the Steyne. They had gone to the Public Library, which might sound dreary but it wasn't, for there were little cakes and a lovely negus and lots of people. As well as books, of course.

As she continued to discuss the things she had done and the places she had gone and the hotel where she had stayed, Mr. Butterfield's eyes began to twinkle disconcertingly. Caroline decided to change the subject. "How does it happen that you gentlemen can spend the afternoon parading about the park? Are you 'gentlemen of leisure'?"

"I am," replied Horton promptly.

"Mr. Horton rarely gets to town," said Butterfield.

"But even provincials must visit the metropolis occasionally."

"My father, Sir Lawrence, has entrusted me with most of the management of our estate," explained Horton.

"Miss Dancer," broke in Butterfield, "could I interest you in an ice? I, personally, am feeling a sudden blast of hot air."

Caroline, very close to a fit of the giggles, asked Mr. Horton if he cared for ices. Mr. Horton replied that he did and suggested a charming new cafe in Regent Street. Mr. Horton politely expressed the hope that if Mr. Butterfield's business called him back to the City he would not hesitate to excuse himself. Mr. Butterfield replied that his time was entirely his own; but perhaps Mr. Horton's father would be expecting him home. Mr. Horton assured Mr. Butterfield that his father could manage without him for a short while longer. To this Butterfield replied only, "Hmm," and Horton asked Miss Dancer what part of the country she was from.

It was two hours and three ices all round before Miss Dancer could force herself to part with these delightful gentlemen who vied over her in such an amusingly obvious way. But she found it harder to get rid of them than she had anticipated. They wanted to know where she lived and insisted unshakably on accompanying her home.

Now Caroline thought they were jolly fellows, but she did not relish having them besiege her in Greville Street. Geoffry might not be best pleased. As usual, Caroline pressed her aunt into service, thinking at the same time that this aunt was beginning to seem a thoroughly detestable bogey. Her aunt, Caroline said, would be seriously displeased if she came home with two strange gentlemen in tow. The gentlemen immediately protested that they were not strange, and Butterfield added that her aunt would have good reason to object if she spent the after-

noon with the sort of gentlemen who would allow her to go home unescorted.

"Surely," cried Caroline, "it has not been the whole afternoon!"

"Of course not," soothed Horton. "It has been an hour at most."

Caroline knew perfectly well it had been nearly three. "I must leave you now," she said firmly. "Thank you very much for an amusing afternoon and those lovely ices, but I am going home alone."

She extended her hand first to one gentlemen, then to the other. Each took it ceremoniously, bowed over it, more or less kissed it, and when she turned with a definite-sounding, "Goodbye," they both followed her.

Caroline was annoyed. "Where do you think you are going?" she snapped, frowning at them.

Butterfield gazed at her with innocent brown eyes. Horton lifted his shoulders helplessly.

"My road lies this way."

"So does mine."

Caroline crossed to the other side of Regent Street, an angry flounce to her stride. Horton nudged Butterfield, who grinned, and they crossed the road behind her, with appreciative eyes on the smartly swinging skirts and the flashing little feet in red slippers. A number of onlookers began to take notice. Caroline crossed the road again. The two young men, conversing easily, continued to dog her tracks. Caroline, flushed with anger at being made to look ridiculous, stopped beside a shop with gloves and handkerchiefs in the window. Her two gentlemen coincidentally paused in their progress at the next shop, where they considered several styles of men's hats. Caroline could have slapped both of them. She turned with a laugh.

"You are rogues, both of you! But you win. You may accompany me home if you like."

"Oh, only if you're sure you don't mind," said Butterfield politely.

"We promise, Miss Dancer, to keep well out of the way of your harpy," added Horton.

Caroline, sweetly smiling, consented to take an arm of each. She directed them down into Trafalgar Square and thence again to the park.

"Do you live in Westminster, Miss Dancer?"

"You'll see when we get there," was the arch retort.

During the comfortable stroll, across the broad paved square, into the tree-lined Mall with its motley collection of well-dressed croquet players and ragged cricketers, down the pebbled path toward the center of the park, Miss Dancer evinced a growing partiality for Mr. Butterfield. To Mr. Horton's disgust, she seemed even to encourage his more flirtatious sallies. Mr. Horton, however, nonchalantly considered the lush, late-summer foliage about him and obstinately refused to heed Mr. Butterfield's increasingly blatant optical signals of "go away." As they reached the arched stone bridge across the pond, Miss Dancer gave a crow of delight and, letting go of her escorts' respective arms, dashed to the top of the bridge and leaned over to make absurdly affectionate noises at a colony of ducks, who craned their iridescent green necks and preened their speckled brown feathers unconcernedly. Mr. Horton, whose enthusiasm had waned considerably during his period of neglect, sauntered tranquilly along, ignoring this sentimental start. Mr. Butterfield, however, went to join Miss Dancer cozily by the side of the bridge. He warned her that the railing was not very high; she should take care, unless she had a fancy to join the ducks. Considerately, he slipped an arm about her waist.

Oh, Miss Dancer knew how to swim, she assured him. The blue eyes shone delightfully; the red lips parted in a laugh.

Well, so did Mr. Butterfield, but he generally did so under more . . . private circumstances.

Butterfield never could, afterward, explain exactly how it happened, but at this point Miss Dancer, holding him with those entrancing blue eyes and that delicious-looking red mouth, got him round so that it was he who stood by the balustrade.

Surely, Miss Dancer murmured, Mr. Butterfield was not so modest that he would not let anyone watch him.

Well . . . said Mr. Butterfield.

"Let's just see how you can do," said Miss Dancer, and, with a healthier shove than one would have imagined such a slim little thing could achieve, she topped him backward into the pond.

There was a roar of outrage from Mr. Butterfield, climaxed by a tremendous splash, a furious squawking and flapping of ducks, and peal after peal of laughter from the astonished and unspeakably gratified Mr. Horton. The last Caroline saw of the scene, Horton was clinging to one side of the bridge, convulsed, an unknown gentleman was running up onto the bridge, and two others headed down toward the edge of the pond. Several ladies were standing about with their mouths hanging open. Caroline did not dare stop for the denouement, but gathered up her skirts and ran pell-mell down the other side of the bridge and dodged through the trees. She continued to run till she had emerged in Birdcage Walk where she engaged a hackney cab, for once, and had herself driven home. If the jarvey thought there was anything out-of-the-way in a fare that giggled convulsively all the way up to High Holborn, he didn't say anything about it. A fare was a fare, and one got all sorts.

Caroline remained in high spirits until she was informed by her landlord that Mr. Price had already come in. Then her heart sank as she thought of the fact that there was

nothing, just nothing for supper. She bolted up the stairs two at a time, as soon as the landlord was out of sight, and met a scowling fair gentleman on the landing.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you," cried Caroline and cast herself into his arms.

"I am going out for something to eat."

"Eat?" squeaked Caroline, as though such a concept was entirely new to her. "It's only just . . . well, no, it's later, but you never eat at this time! Come sit and have a glass of something and I'll have one too and tell you about my day."

"I'm not interested," said Geoffry.

But since he was being jostled along, having his hat removed and his walking stick wrested out of his grasp, and being showered with kisses about the neck and ears, it did seem rather boorish to persist in his disagreeable mood, so he came back upstairs. He recovered his equanimity over a glass of burgundy while Caroline dashed out for some chops to grill.

The more she thought about it, the more she became convinced that Geoffry was unlikely to appreciate the afternoon's episode. She had a distinct feeling it would not appeal to his rather nice sense of propriety. She began to censor her story hastily.

"So what have you been doing with yourself?" Geoffry asked over his mutton chop which was, Caroline noticed with relief, done to a turn. "What have you done which makes you fling yourself all over me in the hallway?"

Caroline smiled. She resolutely refrained from pushing back a curl which was hanging damply over her eyebrow, and she resisted the urge to wipe her hands on her apron in the classic way of the household drudge. She leaned her elbows on the table and announced sexily, "I want a bath. Will you scrub my back?"

Before he could answer, the fortuitous association of bath with the events of the afternoon made her burst into laughter. Geoffry looked mystified.

"Is that so funny?"

She subsided, assuring him it was nothing, and settled down to her supper.

"Geoff," she said after a while, "do you have any friends?"

"Friends? Of course I've got friends. Hordes of speaking acquaintances and two or three I might really call friends. Why?"

"I haven't."

"Haven't what? Got any friends?" Geoffry eyed her curiously, "The Spencers are your friends, and Alice."

"I know, and Mr. Wyke at the mews, and the stableboys. And there are a few people here on the street I say good day to, but not many. This isn't a jolly street like my old one." She wrinkled her nose. "Everyone pretends to be respectable."

"I see no point in advertising one's eccentricities," observed Geoffry.

She fixed him with a penetrating blue stare. "Are you ashamed of me?"

He contemplated the remaining chop for several seconds, then took it onto his plate. "Why? Have you done something to make me so?"

"No, but I might."

He put down his knife and fork. "What the devil are you talking about? Why don't you get to the point?"

There was half a potato on Caroline's plate. She cut it into progressively smaller pieces with her knife until she noticed Geoffry's look of revulsion. Geoffry had exquisite table manners.

"Well, I need something to do, days. Because you are always gone."

"You got yourself into some outrageous scrape this afternoon, that's what it is! Best tell me straight off. Am I going to be really annoyed?" His quizzically tolerant tone abruptly changed as a new thought occurred to him. "Where were you all day?"

"In the park," said Caroline. "I went for a walk. And I . . . well, I met two gentlemen. At least, I had seen them before and they sort of converged on me and introduced themselves before I knew what to say."

Geoffry's eyes were very cold. "And?"

"You are odiously unkind!" exclaimed Caroline, jumping up. She pulled her apron off and threw it into a corner. "I say one word and you are suspicious already! What do you think I am?"

"Caroline, I will not tolerate your being trifled with by other men!" Geoffry's fist smashed down on the table. All the dishes clattered.

"They didn't trifle with me! They bought me raspberry ices! And if I were not left alone all the time to be bored to death I would not talk to strange gentlemen in the park! But you never bring anybody to me and you never take me anywhere so how *should* I meet anybody? They were funny, pleasant gentlemen, and I liked them, and I like raspberry ices and I like being taken out and being complimented and being made to feel I am delightful company instead of just a . . . a . . . housekeeper with the morals of a tomcat!"

As the last of these hot, hostile words exploded into the air, Caroline bit her lip. What a nag she sounded!

Geoffry rose slowly and took a turn about the room, frowning. Caroline backed hesitantly into a chair, wishing she had held her tongue about the whole affair.

"Carrie, why didn't you tell me before that you are bored and lonely? I never thought. . . . You always seem so busy, with a dress or a lace pattern or a funny story

about Penny." He came and took her hands. "How was I to know? You should have said something before."

Caroline smiled unsteadily. His heart began to pound, as it always did. It was very peculiar, the effect this girl had, with her wide eyes and her straight little nose like a young child.

"I didn't really realize it, I guess," she said. "I've felt a bit restless, maybe, but I didn't like to complain. You are really very good to me, and I love Penny dearly . . . but, she, well, she can't talk back to me, you know."

"Of course. And I am such a dull dog. I never do anything but work and eat and take you to bed early. We'll go out," he promised. "And poor Nightingale! Since I've had Tommy exercising him, I've let myself neglect him entirely. I'll collect some people. We'll go for a picnic or something before the weather gives out. To Richmond—would you like that? And I'll take you to Vauxhall Gardens, dancing and fireworks and supper under the trees by the light of the hundred thousand lamps." As Caroline sighed rapturously, he put his arms round her. "I don't think you have the morals of a tomcat, Carrie. Not really, but I am confoundedly jealous and you might be taken advantage of. We discussed it once before, you remember."

"*We* didn't discuss it," said Caroline. "*You* preached about it."

"Don't pout," he laughed. "I can't bear it; I must kiss you if you look so, and then I lose my train of thought."

Predictably, she pouted all the more.

"What a baby you are! 'I like raspberry ices.' When you said that, you sounded about six years old. But come to think of it, I am very fond of raspberry ice myself. I'll bring some tomorrow."

VII

True to his word, Geoffry appeared the next evening with a dripping box containing four molded ices—a rose, a daisy, a watch, and a riding boot, which was, he said, the best they could do for a horse. While he methodically ate the numbers off the watch and Caroline demolished the riding boot from the top down, he informed her that he had arranged with a friend of his to make up a small party to go to Vauxhall on Saturday evening. He offered her a handbill to look over.

"What joys await you, moppet," he said with a touch of irony. "A concert, wherein the celebrated Miss Tyndall will sing, tightrope walkers with the ballet, maybe a fire-eater or two, the waterworks, which I am told are entrancing, and of course the fireworks. Have you ever seen fireworks?"

"Certainly," said Caroline, tossing her head. "I have been to Vauxhall before."

"Then perhaps you'd rather go somewhere else?"

"Oh, no!" she cried, her blasé pose forgotten. "It is *divine* there! Shall we have supper in one of those charming boxes with the gilded pillars? I didn't sup before; Warby was so poor. They say the chickens are lilliputian, and the ham sliced so thin it's transparent—and all for a shocking price! I shall *love* it! Shall we drink champagne?"

"I daresay we shall drink punch, like the plebians we are."

"Oh, yes!" Caroline twirled around the room. "Quarts

and quarts, and we shall be impossibly gay and dissipated and frivolous, and we shan't have a care in the world!''

''Have you so many cares to forget?'' he asked quietly.

She mussed up his hair and kissed the back of his neck. ''Not a one,'' she assured him. ''Not a single one!''

Caroline was so enthralled by the prospect of a party, and a party at Vauxhall Gardens no less, that she spent the next few days in a flurry of activity, even going so far as to launder the curtains out of sheer energy. Her dress, the evening dress from Brighton, was washed and pressed to frilled organdy perfection for hours before it was time to put it on, but with bathing and doing her nails and painting her face just a trifle and dressing her hair, she was only barely ready to climb into the gown when she heard Geoffry's key turn in the lock.

''Don't come in!'' she shrieked. ''I'm not dressed!''

Slightly bewildered, he assured her that he was alone. Upon being informed through the bedroom door that that was not the point, he shrugged philosophically and sat down in the sitting room with yesterday's newspaper. He had not long to wait though. Dashing some Sea Breeze over her head and shoulders, Caroline stepped into her embroidered slippers, pulled on her dress and, adjusting slightly the yellow roses pinned over each ear, opened the door to announce that she was ready.

''Well, good,'' said Geoffry. ''I don't wish to keep the rest of the party waiting. Let's be off.''

She glared at him as he stood up briskly, then she gave an exaggerated sigh and said, ''Very well, we'll try it again.''

She went back into the bedroom, closed the door, and made her entrance once more. This time he regarded her gravely for a long moment before saying, ''That is not at all a bad-looking dress. I must say I showed excellent taste in selecting it.''

Caroline shot him a severe look, but disdained to reply. She got her due, however, a few minutes later as they rounded the corner into Hatton Garden.

"You are lovely, silly girl," he said, pulling her closer on his arm. "And the scent of those roses is intoxicating. There will not be as beautiful a woman in all of London tonight."

Satisfied, she said matter-of-factly, "You don't look half bad yourself. Where are we going?"

"Just round the corner. We'll meet the others, then take a coach to the river."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask about the other members of the party, but then they were crossing the road and were occupied for a few moments in circumventing the traffic. They passed through Ely Court, by the beadle who surveyed them dourly but nodded when Geoffry did, and thence into Ely Place. This was such an attractive little close that Caroline looked round her with some interest. She had explored her neighborhood pretty thoroughly in other directions, but, somewhat intimidated by the beadle, she had left this corner alone. The narrow street was dotted here and there with neatish stucco houses of fairly recent date, and it was to one of these that her eye was drawn by several moving figures in a large square window.

She let out a horrified gasp and clutched convulsively at her escort's arm, while trying at the same time to hide behind him.

"Good God!" cried Geoffry. "Are you ill?"

"No, no," she whispered. "I just . . . there . . . I just saw somebody I don't want to see me. Please, quickly, let's get away."

He glanced up and down the street, noticed one or two passersby, gave Caroline a dubious glance, much as the passersby were doing, and said, "Very well."

"Not that way!"

She pulled back as he stepped forward.

"What *are* you about?" he snapped. "Don't drag on my coat sleeve like that! Who is this person you don't wish to see? Somebody in there?"

He gestured at the window in question. When Caroline nodded anxiously, he conducted her at a smart pace across the street and out of sight. "Which person? A man?"

She nodded. "The lovely one in the black coat with the black hair. He is one of the gentlemen I met in the park. I can't let him see me!"

"Indeed?" His tone struck her as a bit peculiar. "If there was no more to it than a raspberry ice, I don't see why you should be so reluctant to meet him again."

"Well, I . . . well . . . there was more to it, in a way. Oh, dear,I should have told you at the time."

Caroline pressed her hand to her mouth, raising distressed eyes to his stern face.

"Perhaps you'd do better to lie your way out of it." He took her by the shoulders and made her face him squarely. "I tell you, Caroline, if ever I discover you have deceived me, I will murder you."

"It wasn't that!" she squeaked. "It wasn't anything like that! I swear it!"

The grip on her arm relaxed. "Then why are you afraid to tell me what it was?"

"Oh . . . I know you won't like it. Promise not to scold me?"

When his expression did not change and he made no reply, she went on without the assurance. "Remember I told you he put his arm around me and I ran away?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was true." She paused. "Only after he put his arm around me, he sort of tried to kiss me."

"You baggage," Geoffry began, shaking her.

"And then I pushed him into the pond."

Geoffry's temper evaporated magically. "You *what*?"

"I pushed him into the pond," she repeated. "And *then* I ran away."

"You pushed him into the pond? Off the bridge?"

"I made sure to find out first if he could swim," she pointed out.

"Caroline, you are the most unconscionable madcap!" Geoffry sounded as if he considered this a rather impressive accomplishment.

"Well, Geoff, I didn't mean for him to kiss me, but he was insisting, and while I was making my mind what to do, he pounced on me, simply pounced. So I pushed him away. And since I was startled, perhaps I pushed a bit hard, and he just went over. I was as surprised as he was!"

Caroline's voice was full of persuasive ingenuousness, but he wasn't taken in.

"You little witch, I'd lay odds you let him kiss you with the clear intention of knocking him off the bridge because he was such a coxcomb." He chuckled appreciatively. "Come on now, we're getting late."

"Do have a care," Caroline admonished, still trying to keep out of sight of the window.

"No need to be nervous, Carrie. I know Butterfield. He'll take it as a great joke."

"You *know* him?"

"Of course I know him. He's one of the men we're going to spend the evening with."

"Oh, no!" cried Caroline. "I can't! He must loathe me!"

"Nonsense." Geoffry steered her masterfully across the street, as she continued to shrink fearfully behind him. "Butterfield is a good fellow. My stockbroker. And a lady killer of the first water."

A smug little smile played about Caroline's lips at this intelligence.

"He has also," said Geoffry, "been my closest friend for years."

She gazed at him in surprise and stepped up one more step than there was. His hand under her arm saved her from falling, but she was flustered, and by the time she had recovered enough to ask more questions, the door was being opened by a cheerful grey-haired woman who unceremoniously told them to go on into the front parlor.

Geoffry, with his customary courtesy, presented Caroline to the older woman, whose house it was, and then ushered her easily across the hall into the parlor. As they entered the room, Mark Butterfield left the window seat and came to greet them.

"Miss Dancer, may I present Mr. Butterfield?" said Geoffry, just as if she had not been telling him three minutes ago that they had met before.

Caroline smiled somewhat uncertainly, and when the smile was wholeheartedly returned, she extended her hand.

"Miss Dancer," said Mark, "I am delighted. I am sure we shall get on, if you permit my saying so, swimmingly."

As Caroline choked, she noticed Geoffry cock a warning eyebrow and recovered fast. Mark noticed, too. He wasn't quite sure if the warning had been for Caroline or for himself.

"Miss Dancer," he went on with a gracious sweep of one long white hand, "Miss Cartwright, Miss Johnson, and Mr. Silling."

Miss Cartwright, tall and dark and almost as handsome as Mark, made a formal but cordial inclination of the head. Miss Johnson, plump and fair with little laugh wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, smiled in a friendly way. Mr. Silling, an older man than the others, bowed from the waist and smiled as well. Caroline began to relax . She

wondered if either of the other women was a kept mistress like herself; she rather fancied Miss Johnson was and Miss Cartwright was not, at least not Mark's. She had no illusions about the respectability of either of these ladies, but there was certainly nothing about their manners or their appearance to make anyone look askance. Caroline could see she would have to be on her best behavior if she were not to show to disadvantage.

She wondered if they all knew about her. She decided that they probably knew no more of her than she of them, except Mr. Butterfield. It occurred to her abruptly that he had shown no hint of surprise at meeting her; he must have known all along who she was! At first she was furiously indignant, but then she reflected how thoughtful he had been to station himself in plain sight of the street so that she should not be taken off guard when she encountered him, and she began to see Mr. Butterfield in a more kindly light. That he was an inveterate charmer was evident in the way he thanked his landlady for the loan of her parlor and the doting assurance he received that he was welcome to it. He was no doubt desperately conceited, but Caroline had to own it was impossible not to like him.

As they drove to Whitehall in a hackney coach, she decided that the rest of the company was likable too, even Miss Cartwright, and by the time they had embarked in a long, slim boat and were heading up river in the waning afternoon light, she found she was chatting smoothly with everyone. Caroline had never been on the Thames in a boat before, and although she doubted it was particularly charming down in the City, where the volume of sewage was terrific, up here it was delightful. The sights of Westminster glided by like something in a dream. Not least, Caroline found she was intrigued by the other parties in boats going to Vauxhall. Of course she knew that the fashionable fashionables no longer patronized the Gar-

dens as they had some years ago, when one was as likely to see the Prince of Wales as anybody. But still she scrutinized all the boats she saw. And if the occupants were finely dressed, she imagined they were—why not? —Count d'Orsay and Lady Blessington. Or maybe that pensive one was Lady Caroline Lamb, thinking of Lord Byron and wondering if the world had really been well lost for him. Caroline rather wondered what it would be like to have a world to lose.

"Look there," murmured Mr. Silling, who had been watching her with a smile. "I think that's Lord Wellesley."

"Where?" cried Caroline in excitement, then blushed hotly at having betrayed such a crass enthusiasm for the sign of a Somebody.

"That one," said Mr. Silling. "In the green coat, with the Nose."

"Has he got the Nose? I thought only Wellington had it."

"The Duke has more, but all the brothers have it."

"And that's Richard?" Caroline smiled happily. "Not Henry, whose wife ran away with Lord Anglesey when he was Paget, but Richard, whose political career foundered on a scandal over an adventuress?"

"That's Richard," said Miss Cartwright, sounding as if she might know something of Richard in her own right.

Geoffry would not have laid any very great odds upon that particular man in the boat being Lord Wellesley, but Caroline was so diverted at having laid eyes on a disreputable notable that he had not the heart to voice his skepticism. After all, maybe it was.

So far as Caroline was concerned, the trip was a thoroughgoing success, but when they arrived at the point of disembarkation, she was ready for something new. Having been at Vauxhall once before, she steeled herself

for the fairy-tale explosion of lights and colors, but as she came through the entryway she was unable to stifle a tiny gasp of pleasure. The orchestra played entrancingly in its Chinese pagoda festooned with colored lights. To the left, the pointed roof of the Rotunda and the appended ellipse of the Saloon offered the delicious promise of dancing, and on both sides the wide, semicircular sweep of the supper-box pavilions gave a gratifying impression of luxury.

While Mark went off in search of their table, in the pavilion named "The Fox," after the painting which adorned one wall, the rest of the little party went into the Cross Walk and amused themselves by peeking down the various *allées* and deciding where to go first. Perhaps they should just stroll, enjoying the pieces of statuary and other plastic elements which offered variety in the prospects through the trees. Or perhaps they should go to see the transparency of the King, elaborately represented as a Conquering Hero attended by a figure of Britannia, along with Providence, Fame, and the Goddess of Wisdom.

"The goddess of what?" asked Miss Cartwright, a trifle sardonically.

"He needs all the help he can get," was Geoffry's dry rejoinder.

"Oh, don't talk about the king," put in Caroline. "You'll get onto Whiggish politics and some passerby will start a row."

"Oh, I hardly think Vauxhall is much of a Tory stronghold," said Miss Johnson with a smile.

"The king was Whiggish enough himself once," observed Mr. Silling.

"Before he came to the throne," Geoffry rejoined and then turned the subject, to Caroline's relief.

Mark reappeared shortly, and the thorny question of where to go first was taken out of their hands by the

ringing of a bell, which inspired everyone in the Gardens to crowd off in the same direction.

"Where are we going?" whispered Caroline, clinging tight to Geoffry's arm as the rest of their party was momentarily separated from them by a press of rather boisterous young men.

"I haven't the faintest idea. The same place everybody else is. I fancy its the waterworks, being too light still for fireworks."

By keeping with the crowd, they discovered that this conclusion was correct. The performance began just as they came close enough to see, and to Caroline's enchantment there was represented the Lost City of Atlantis, suitably illuminated in blues and greens. Behind a shimmering curtain of water could be distinguished the ruins of a Greek city—white colonnades, sculptured pediments, fallen blocks of stone. All around undulated strands of seaweed, and fishes and seahorses and various crustaceans embellished the architectural elements and the sandy sea bed while the lights played eerily over the scene, highlighting here a statue, there an enormous conch shell, and, finally, a pale and grisly reminder of the unfortunate inhabitants: a skull, half hidden in the seaweed near a bright, untarnished pile of useless pieces of gold.

As the lights went out and the curtain descended, a resonant voice slowly read out a poem composed for the occasion. The poem, Caroline had to admit, did not compare with the poetry Stirling used to read her, but she was lavish in her praise of the Lost City. Geoffry reflected silently that Atlantis bore an excessively strong resemblance to the Athenian Acropolis and, aloud, that the trick with the waterfall had been very effective.

"Oh, yes," said Mark, "but the whole wanted a siren, with a lot of bare bosom and green hair, singing, don't you think?"

Miss Cartwright suggested he offer his criticism to Mr. Simpson, the worthy master of ceremonies, and Mark assured her he would do so at the earliest opportunity.

It was agreed that they should spend the next few minutes walking about at random and meet again when the fireworks began. Mr. Silling said that he, for one, could do with a bowl of punch to tide him over till suppertime, and Geoffry agreed that a bit of refreshment would be well received. Mark disappeared with Miss Cartwright in the direction of the Italian Walk, which was also the direction of the Druid's, generally known simply as the Dark Walk.

Caroline found that Arrack Punch tasted of liquorice and was really quite nice. She also found it very relaxing to sit listening to the orchestra and making conversation, so when the next bell was rung, to signify the start of the ballet, she agreed with the others that this one entertainment could be foregone. The lights in the Grove gradually took on a soft blur which was restful to the eyes, the orchestra began to play in strains almost celestially euphonious, and everybody had become quite devastatingly witty by the time the bell rang for the pyrotechnical display. The bowl of punch had entirely disappeared. Unlike the ballet, the fireworks could not be missed, so the congenial foursome rose with the bell and once again followed the crowd to a good vantage point. Caroline, finding that the noise and the brilliant cascades of color made her giddy, resolved to be a little more chary of the punch.

When the hair-raising exploits of a tightrope walker among the fiery sparks were over and the last dazzling blaze had died away, Miss Cartwright suggested they make their way to the dancing saloon. This scheme met with universal approval and was adopted forthwith. In the Great Room, the gentlemen commandeered chairs and then disappeared to find drinks for the ladies as they sat

viewing with satisfaction the preparations for the opening cotillion. Rather to Caroline's disappointment and, she fancied, to Miss Cartwright's as well, the gentlemen did not reappear until after the dance had begun, but once they had been fortified with some more punch all round they were ready to join in the next, which by good fortune was a country dance Caroline knew well. Somewhat to her surprise, Geoffry proved to dance both with refinement and with engaging enthusiasm; the latter quality could be accounted for by a natural affinity, or perhaps by the punch, but the former had clearly been acquired through the competent offices of a first-rate dancing master. It was just one more indication that for all his intimate involvement with affairs of commerce, Geoffry had definitely had the education of a gentleman.

Several times during the evening, Caroline had noticed one or the other of her party nod at an acquaintance, but no one had so far spoken, so she was a bit curious when her partner, after conducting her back to her seat, excused himself and went off to speak to several gentlemen who had signaled to him during the dancing and were sitting at a table in a far corner of the room. Caroline saw them greet him, offer him a seat, which he smilingly refused, and a glass, which he accepted. When one of the gentlemen, a young officer in uniform, seemed to be returning her stare, she looked quickly away.

"Lord Redford," said Miss Cartwright. "The older one in mouse brown."

Caroline risked another peek, identifying Lord Redford, but seeing also that the young officer was still staring at her, she therefore looked away once more. She wondered briefly who was Lord Redford, and how Geoffry knew him, and she thought how very much there was in his life about which she knew nothing and probably would always know nothing.

Her reveries were interrupted by Mr. Butterfield, who was asking her to dance. It was a waltz.

"I should love to," replied Caroline politely. "Perhaps the next after this?"

Her hint was not taken. "No," said Mark, "if I don't get my dance now, Price will be back and prevent me. Come, Miss Dancer, you must live up to your name."

When he smiled in that way, he really was quite breath-takingly handsome, Caroline reflected. She found herself up and being led onto the floor before she realized what she was about.

"Mr. Butterfield," she protested in an agonized, if belated, whisper, "I don't know how to waltz!"

"Miss Dancer," he replied, "a girl with a body like yours has waltzing in her bones. All you need is to open your eyes for a moment to let the inspiration in. It's so very simple!"

He smiled again, and Caroline wondered if Geoffry would object to her dancing with him. She had an uneasy feeling that if he did he would be completely justified.

"Here, watch that girl there," Mark counseled. "The one in blue. She's doing it very carefully, no confusing frills. *One*-two-three-*four*-five-six. Don't bother with the going-round part; that's my responsibility."

He turned to face her, sketched a bow, which she returned, then put one hand firmly at her waist and took her hand with the other.

But it's so awkward, thought Caroline. I shall fall on my face and die of embarrassment.

"Now, darling, just remember to do the contrary of what I do, so we don't collide, and we shall get on capitally. I'm sure you have a superb sense of rhythm."

In spite of herself, Caroline's eyes twinkled in appreciation of this remark, and Mark's eyes twinkled in appreciation of her appreciation.

"My friend Price has better taste than I ever would have credited him with," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon?" said Caroline, who had heard perfectly.

"I said, *step*-round-close, *back*-round-close. Have you got it?"

"No," said Caroline, but she found she was off and, after one false start, waltzing quite tolerably. It was not quite true that she did not know how to waltz, for she had read a treatise or two on the subject and had tried it out herself. But dancing books were always so hard to understand. Somehow they seemed to neglect mentioning if it was left or right that one was to turn, and if they remembered that information they would fail to tell which foot to start on. She had been hopelessly confused by the waltz, but here she was waltzing like a top!

She laughed up at her partner so delightedly she almost missed a step.

"Ah, yonder returns Big Chief Loweringbrow," Mark observed a moment later. "Pirouette, Miss Dancer: out, round, close, back on the *left* foot. Splendid, my love. You are very clever indeed."

Thrilled to discover she had in fact executed the pirouette perfectly, and under Geoffry's scrutiny, Caroline laughed saucily and remarked, "I am not your love, Mr. Butterfield."

"No," he agreed, pulling her momentarily closer, "but you might be, if you were not already somebody else's."

"I am not his love either," replied Caroline with a shake of her golden curls.

"No? He led me to believe you were. How monstrously ungentlemanlike!" was Mark's response, delivered in what could only be called a caressing tone. He was amused to note that Geoffry was assiduously ignoring them.

"Oh," continued Caroline, "I am in his keeping, right enough. You knew that all along, didn't you?" she added accusingly. "That day in the park and everything?"

"Oh, no," he assured her, "not at first. But when it transpired that you had been in Brighton at the same hotel and doing the same things as my friend Price, whom I knew to have been in the company of a pretty, slim, blue-eyed girl with golden curls, I made the deduction. And remember, I had heard your voice before, through the door of his flat."

"It *was* you then! I thought it must be. Why did you say you were Geoff?"

Mark smiled his bewitching smile. "So you would let me in, of course. I was curious to see you."

"Well, now you have seen me," Caroline returned. "And you can also see that I am not his love but his mistress, which is much more practical. Our relationship is a mutually satisfactory business arrangement."

"I understand," said Mark.

Mark did understand. He understood more than Caroline, as yet, did herself. Price, you miserable dilettant, he apostrophized, if you had at least made a sham of being in love with her, she'd have been on her guard. But now here she is, poor sweetheart, up to her eyebrows and she still thinks it's just business.

For the moment carefree, Caroline returned after the dance to her protector, smiling happily. He smiled back, danced another dance or two with her, and then the company retired to The Fox for supper. Supper consisted, as Caroline had foreseen, of a number of items more remarkable for their scantiness than for any gourmet qualities, but since everything was liberally seasoned with punch and yet more punch, the supper was much enjoyed by all. One diverting moment came when they were interrupted, albeit very politely, by the young man who had returned

Caroline's gaze from Lord Redford's table in the dancing saloon. This youth, somewhat pot-valiant and obviously much smitten, begged Geoffry to present him to Caroline, but when the requested office had been graciously performed, he was stricken with that agonized tongue-tied shyness from which the violently infatuated sometimes suffer, and retreated shortly in confusion. The rest of the company made merciless sport of the hapless Captain as soon as he was out of earshot, but Caroline not unreasonably thought he had been rather sweet.

The enchantment of the waterworks, the splendor of the fireworks, the gaiety of the dancing, and the geniality of supper notwithstanding, the high point of the evening for Caroline was the return boat trip. The night was soft and cool, the sky studded with points of light, very deep and far away. Fragments of shattered moon danced on the surface of the black, shining river. It was beautiful but just a little frightening, so that the reassuring presence of the jovial company seemed doubly welcome. In the general atmosphere of unconstraint, far from the eyes of the world, each couple drew together, reclining with unobtrusive intimacy against the cushions and indulging in such kisses and caresses as did not flagrantly transgress the bounds of good taste.

Caroline lay drowsily against her lover. She felt his heart beat close to her ear and traced the shape of his hand as it rested against her thigh, except for moments when it held the flask which, containing the remnants of the last punchbowl, was being desultorily passed round. Although the conversation was still animated and amusing, Caroline took little part in it. She listened to the heartbeat and to the rhythmic sound of the oars in the water and let her mind wander.

The company broke up at Whitehall Stairs. Mark and Miss Cartwright set off in one direction; the other four

shared a carriage as far as Somerset House, where Mr. Silling and his lady got down. There were some cheerful goodbyes spoken, an invitation to tea tendered and accepted, and then Geoffry ordered the carriage on.

He turned to Caroline immediately. "I thought we'd never be alone," he muttered and began to kiss her, reaching inside her dress to feel her breasts. "I want you. Now. Right now."

Caroline realized he was a good deal drunker than she had imagined. Fortunately, she found that although her own thoughts were certainly fuzzy, she still had a sense of decency. She laughed and pushed him away. "You're out of your mind. We're in a hackney cab in the middle of London!"

"True, I'm out of mind. I'm out of my mind for you. I've been on hot coals this past hour, watching you, wanting you, wanting to feel your body against mine . . . your lips, your neck, your bosom, your wonderful belly, your warm, soft thighs . . . come here, come here, come here."

Caroline began to be seriously alarmed. "We're in a cab," she repeated, struggling.

"I know we're in a cab. I don't give a damn. I could take you on a galloping horse. Sit on my lap." He pulled her onto his knees, with one hand on his trouser buttons. Caroline was horrified.

"I won't, Geoff. I absolutely will not let you make love to me in a cab," she whispered, squirming frantically as he drew up her skirts faster than she could push them down again. "You mustn't! Please don't! The driver will stop the carriage to see what we are about, making such a stir. *Please*, Geoffry!"

He laughed at the note of panic in her voice, and desisted. "Sit on my lap anyway."

He put both arms around her, and for a few moments

there was no sound but the even clipclopping of the horse's hoofs and the rattle of the wheels on the cobblestones. Caroline sat very still with her face against his shoulder, hoping that if she was completely quiet he could calm down. After a while he put his face into her hair and began to sing, softly and surprisingly tunefully, a long ballad with verses about a beautiful maiden, a handsome hero, an ambitious father, an irate husband, and a baby boy. As most ballads do, it came to a tragic and bloody end, about which Geoffry sang with some gusto. In an abrupt change of mood, he next launched into the lyrics which had recently been set to a popular waltz. He ordered Caroline to sing, too, and she did the rest of the way home.

They were still humming and giggling as they climbed the stairs to their rooms, but Caroline made an effort to be quiet. As a gesture of good faith, Geoffry pulled off his shoes as soon as they were inside. Then he danced his enchanted mistress around the sitting room until he had run out of waltzes to hum. Rather than start in again on his waltz repertory, he began a galop, but Caroline didn't know how to do a galop, and as Geoffry was in no condition to teach her he danced her haphazardly into the bedroom and slammed the door.

In bed, he said things he had never said before. He spoke passionate words of love and endearment. He called her his darling, his sunshine, his heart, and his soul. He loved her to distraction, he said. She must never leave him, and he would never leave her. He would love her forever.

To Caroline, who had never even heard the word love on his lips before, it was overwhelming. Very rationally, she reminded herself that he was madly drunk, that he didn't mean the half of it, that he would have forgotten it all by morning. But at the same time she was answering in kind, and she was dismayed to realize that she was no

longer drunk at all and that she meant every tender word she said. She loved him. It was a revelation.

In spite of the sternly sensible exhortations she had made herself, Caroline awoke in the morning with a delightful feeling of exhilaration. Geoffry slept the sleep of the dead.

Such a lovely moustache, Caroline thought absurdly. She reached out and smoothed it with one careful finger. Goose, goose, goose, she repeated to herself. Don't think you are going to be his heart's darling and all those things in the cold, sober light of day. You are going to be his doxy, just as you were yesterday.

She got up and tidied the sitting room. At first she was careful to make as little noise as possible, but as the time passed she found she could not refrain from banging things down and dropping things loudly. She forced herself to go into the kitchen and make tea. It was unlikely, she told herself drily, that he would want much more than tea.

Trying very hard to be brisk and nonchalant, she was annoyed to find that she started violently when her name was shouted from the bedroom. She appeared in the doorway a split second later. Despite her best efforts, there was an eager light in her eyes and a hint of nervousness in the even voice that said, "Good morning, Geoff." She almost said, "Good morning, darling," but she couldn't quite get it out.

"Mmph," said Geoffry. He lay with one arm across his face. "I am afraid to open my eyes."

"I daresay," replied Caroline. He doesn't remember. You know he doesn't.

"Oh, what a head." He was silent for a moment. "Dear God, I tried to make love to you in the hackney coach, didn't I? Dear God."

Caroline had the impression that if he thought about it he would be scandalized, but he just couldn't take the trouble to think about it right at the moment.

"I also remember waltzing round the sitting room and knocking over all the furniture."

He started to chuckle, and then stopped, pressing his arm tighter against his head. "What happened next? The obvious?"

"The obvious," said Caroline. "You took me to bed and half killed me. Then you went to sleep and have been unconscious ever since."

There was rather a startled silence from the man with the lovely moustache. After a long moment, he said, "You're angry. Did I hurt you?"

Did you hurt me? Oh, God, did you hurt me! cried Caroline in silent anguish. She said, "Not really. At least you didn't leave any visible scars."

"Carrie, what the hell," he burst out. He sat up abruptly to look at her and then immediately dropped his head into his hands, covering his eyes and moaning, "My God." He added meekly, "Perhaps we can talk about it later?"

Caroline laughed. "Nonsense, Geoff. I was hoaxing you. You were just foxed."

"That I was," he agreed. "Dear God, what a head." He lay back in bed and covered his face with a pillow. "For heaven's sake, Caroline," he mumbled, "you had me thinking I'd beaten you with the poker."

Caroline giggled. "Well, in a manner of speaking. . . ."

"Go away, scabrous woman," he chuckled, throwing the pillow at her. "It hurts my head to laugh."

"I've made you some tea," she offered.

"Tea. Tea. . . . Very well, I suppose I'll have some tea, moppet."

As Caroline put tea and bread on a tray in the kitchen, she read herself one more lecture. Just forget it. Even if he does remember, he has no intention of owning to it. But he's fond of you; he's kind to you; he pays your bills, he comes home to you every day. You're lucky to have what you've got. And he doesn't keep you so you'll nag him or have crochets. He keeps you so you'll make him happy. If you don't do it, he'll find someone else, and then where will you be?

So when she brought in the tea, she was smiling. She bantered him about his headache while she pulled the curtains which had been forgotten the night before. She sat on the bed in her beautiful sea green dressing gown and fed him bread and butter in the half light, and they both drank tea with enough brandy in it to combat their headaches, as they entertained themselves in reflecting upon the amusements of the night before. Everything seemed to be just as it had been, except that now Caroline understood her restless anxiety, her disturbing sense of insecurity. She was no longer the resilient, independent spirit she had been. She had fallen abysmally in love, and she felt trapped.

VIII

As a result of the outing to Vauxhall, Caroline's life took on a more satisfactory pattern, at least so far as externals were concerned. She now felt she had some friends, and her existence no longer centered so exclusively on her lover. Miss Johnson came up to tea; Mark invited them both to supper; Caroline and Miss Cartwright made arrangements to ride. This last plan was several

times thwarted by rain, but in the end it did come off and proved to be very pleasant, not least because as they cantered along through the park they made several chance encounters, one of whom was the young Captain Tilsitt.

The Captain, somewhat less timid but no less taken by Caroline on second meeting, rode with them for a little while and made himself pretty agreeable. Unable to elicit from Caroline any useful information about herself, he presently took himself off, but added hopefully that he always rode in the park at this hour and that if she chanced to do the same he might see her. Caroline, diverted and flattered, replied that it was very possible.

Miss Cartwright once again made several humorous remarks at the young Captain's expense, but Caroline refused to countenance them and so they spoke of other things. Caroline learned surprisingly little about Miss Cartwright, except that she had known Mark for rather a long time and that she had certain reasons for having chosen this particular hour to ride. As the hour was unfashionably early, Caroline assumed that she had some sort of connection with the *beau monde* which made her wish to avoid a chance meeting, and she was sorry, for she had been hoping to make some sort of connection with the *beau monde* herself through Miss Cartwright.

Although her desire to cultivate Miss Cartwright could thus be said to have ulterior motives, nothing like that entered into her liking for Miss Johnson. After having visited in Greville Street, Miss Johnson invited Caroline to her own home in Covent Garden. There, Caroline found, she was known as Mrs. Silling and lived with Mr. Silling and their little boy, plus her sister who was an actress and whatever stray actors or actresses the sister might bring home. The house was chaotic, with people wandering good-humoredly in and out at will, wearing bizarre clothes, bizarre coiffures, and, as likely as not,

bizarre faces. But Caroline's attention was largely taken up by the little boy.

He was three, and he was named David, after Garrick, the great actor. Miss Johnson, or Mrs. Silling, or Estella, as she was more universally know, had been an actress herself at one time. But after she had been with Mr. Silling for a year or so, after his wife had found out about her and left him and he had moved in for good, she had decided she made a better housewife than actress. When David had come along, she had been only too happy to use him as an excuse to give up acting. Of course, she had not divorced herself from the stage altogether, as Caroline could see, but David took up a good deal of time, and, Estella confided, he had a brother or a sister on the way. She laughed. There would be no time for languishing idleness once she had a pair of them underfoot.

Caroline, smiling responsively, patted the child on the head and tried to suppress the suddenly searing desire to have a child of her own. She knew it was not something Geoffry would want, but she couldn't help thinking that if he really had one, a pretty towheaded baby like this, with a dear little cherubic face, he would love it. And she knew that his sense of responsibility would never allow him to abandon her in such a case. At the very least, he would see that she and his child were never in want and he would keep in contact with her always, to know how the child was getting on. Recovering, Caroline told herself she was a designing hussy, and tried to put the idea out of her mind. But she reflected that it might happen anyway, despite their efforts to avoid it.

When she mentioned the subject to Geoffry, his reaction was unequivocal.

"I hope, my dear," he said in an awful voice, "that question was a hypothetical one."

"Oh, yes," replied Caroline, "perfectly. I was just curious. What would you do?"

"Castrate myself," said Geoffry.

Rather taken aback by the violence of his sentiments, she nevertheless pointed out airily, "It would be too late."

Wryly, he acknowledged the cogency of this point and thought serious for a moment. "Do? Dear God, I simply do not know what I should do. Just go on, I suppose. There are plenty of bastards in the world, after all. One more wouldn't do much harm."

"Sometimes," said Caroline in a suffocating voice, "you are quite hateful."

She got up and quit the room, leaving him to stare pensively after her for a moment, shrug, and go back to reading his paper. After a few minutes he followed her into the bedroom. He found her sitting on the straight wooden chair, gazing stonily out the window.

He took her gently by the shoulders, bringing her head back to rest against him, and told her what she knew already, that if she should have a child he would take care of both of them, that he hoped she would not, because it was always difficult for the child, but that if she did she need have no fear she would be abandoned. Did she believe him?

Yes, she believed him. How did he feel about abortions?

He swung her sharply around. "Don't you dare. If you are carrying a child, you carry it to the end of its term. If you don't want it, I'll find somewhere else for it to go. But don't you dare abort a child of mine," he said, his voice shaking with anger.

Caroline scowled. "I'm not carrying a child. I told you before. I just wanted to know your feelings."

He stared at her for some moments before giving her a look of profound exasperation. "I don't know what's got into you lately," he said, and went back to his newspaper.

Caroline didn't know either. Or at least, she didn't know what to do about it. She was on edge. Her ups were too far up, and her downs were too far down. She wasn't herself. She was always in a position of feeling that she had to hide what she really was.

At times, when he was being very kind to her, she thought she should tell him. "I'm unhappy," she would say. "I'm unhappy because I love you and you don't love me." And perhaps he would say, "But of course I love you, silly child," and everything would be wonderful. Other times, when he was being very brisk and businesslike, she knew he didn't love her at all. He just found her convenient, and he was used to having her by. He took her for granted. And so she was. When she thought along those lines, she knew she couldn't possibly tell him. She went on being wretched and bottling everything up inside herself. She knew something had to give way, and when it did, she was very glad she had never made him any maudlin declarations of love.

With a more active social life, Caroline had begun to feel the lack of a servant more keenly. She had several times asked her friend Alice from Carter Lane to come up and give her a hand, but to do this, Alice had to forgo other work. As a friend, she didn't like to take money for helping out; as a wage earner, she couldn't afford not to. It was an awkward position for her, and she and Caroline had discussed an alternative. Alice was young and attractive and had before her Caroline's shining example of how a young woman might make her way in the world for rather more than the slave wages of the unskilled female worker. Alice's mother, if approached with the sugges-

tion, would have screamed and fainted dead away at the notion of her daughter following Caroline's path, but if she were presented with a *fait accompli*, it was to be expected that this well-intentioned but poverty-stricken woman would accept the situation philosophically. Alice's father was dead. Caroline, who had really seen only the soft side of a hard way of life, naively thought that for someone in Alice's position finding a man to take care of her could hardly fail to be an improvement.

"You see, Geoff," she explained, sitting on his lap as she generally did when she wanted something, "I could offer her a steady job. She could live here and help me as a sort of maid, make herself generally useful, you know. It would be jolly for me to have someone about and in the kitchen and so on. She wouldn't want much in the way of wages but bed and board. She could sleep in one of the small rooms on the other side. All she needs, you see, is to be here and observe how we go on—how it is that one pleases a man, you know, a gentleman like yourself. Hair and clothes and table manners and all that sort of thing, which she will learn quickly, for she's bright, although she has not much sense of it yet. And . . . other things, just generally, in the way of manners."

"In other words, sit at the foot of our bed at night."

Caroline gazed at him blankly, totally unprepared for this sarcasm.

"*And* use our sitting room as a clearing house, I daresay," he snapped. "Good God, Caroline, I have no objection to Alice's coming here as a servant. In fact, I should be quite well satisfied, for you know I dislike the way you have gone on—though it has pleased you to lie to me, I am aware that you do all the housework yourself. But if she comes, she shall come as a servant and earn a servant's wages. This is not a charitable institution for the

education and training of prostitutes.''

Caroline, flushing scarlet, jumped up in a fury. ''You are calling *me* a prostitute!''

''When you think like one and talk like one, what do you expect me to call you, a vestal virgin?''

''I am not a prostitute!'' screamed Caroline, cut to the heart. She drew back her hand and slapped him as hard as she could across the face. After the sharp sound there was a moment of frozen silence; they both stood like statues. To the wounded Caroline, his expression of incredulous outrage was so satisfactory that, gone quite berserk, she hit him again.

The scene exploded.

Starting up from his chair, Geoffry grabbed her by the hair and dragged her across his knees, kicking and screeching defiance. He lifted her skirts and spanked her like a naughty child. When his hand was raw, he picked her up and carried her, still screaming and thrashing wildly, into the bedroom. He threw her onto the bed hard enough to knock the wind out of her, then with a few parting curses he strode out of the room. Caroline recovered her breath enough to heave the water pitcher; he heard it smash behind him as he made for the door, still cursing, white with rage. As he reached the entryway, Caroline materialized in the sitting room door and hurled a lamp. It struck him a glancing blow in the shoulder and the chimney shattered, slicing through his coat and then crashing to the floor. While she cast her eyes around for another missile, he left the house, clattered down the stairs and out the front door, staring straight through the assorted chattering neighbors. With a savage oath, he brushed aside the landlord, who was remonstrating vociferously, and was three streets away before he had regained enough control of himself to consider where he was going. Then he hailed a hackney coach and went to Coleman Street.

Upstairs, Caroline had bolted the hall door and gone to her room, where she lay curled up in a knot on the bed, deaf to the landlord's poundings and scandalized commentary in the hallway, staring blindly into the air until finally, succumbing to utter emotional exhaustion, she fell asleep.

It was something of a shock to Scofield when he came in shortly after ten to find his employer in his own parlor. Geoffry looked up briefly as he came in, then buried his nose back in his newspaper. That one look was enough for Scofield. He hurried into the bedroom to air out the musty sheets and into the kitchen to make sure there was coffee, which Scofield himself did not drink.

There was, but it was stale, as Geoffry remarked disagreeably at breakfast in the morning. Scofield had more sense than to say anything but, "Yes, sir, I'll replace it," and when Geoffry left for work with a growled warning to expect him for supper, Scofield said, "Very good, sir," with the wooden look of implacable discretion common among the better class of servants. Scofield was perishing of curiosity.

His curiosity was in no fair case to be gratified, however. Geoffry gave no indication of how long he intended to remain in Coleman Street; he also did not send for the odds and ends of his belongings which remained in Greville Street. He simply resumed his old habits as if he had never abandoned them and said nothing at all. Scofield shrewdly decided this was because he didn't know what else to do.

Caroline, left to her own devices, spent the first day after the quarrel in sullen and wretched solitude. The second day, she set forth early on Penny and rode to Richmond Park, where Geoffry had promised to take her on a picnic. She debated seriously the question of whether

she would ever speak to him and came to an impasse. By the third day, her natural buoyance had reasserted itself to the point where she was able to busy herself around the house, re-establish precarious relations with the landlord, and even run down to Covent Garden for a few minutes with Estella Silling. But the sight of little David and the general air of casual conviviality depressed her unbearably, and she soon came home again. She fixed herself some supper, of which she ate no more than a mouthful, and was just putting the dishes away when there came a knock at the door which made her start so violently she almost dropped a plate.

Undecided, she tiptoed into the hall and the knock came again. It didn't sound like Geoffry.

"Who is it?"

"I think, Miss Dancer, we have played this scene before," came the voice of Mark Butterfield.

Caroline laughed and opened the door. She gave him her hand, which he kissed enthusiastically.

"I'm not sure I shall let you in," she warned. "Do you come on your own account or as an envoy from that odious friend of yours?"

Mark bowed. "My dear lady, I come on account of neither. I come on your account. I thought you might be in need of cheering up, so I have brought you a bottle of Spanish sherry, a posy, and a sympathetic ear."

The sherry and the "posy" he produced from behind his back and offered with a flourish. "Now may I come in?"

Accepting the presents with good grace, Caroline stood aside.

"I should have sent the ear along with the rest, by messenger, as being more discreet," he went on blithely, "but I thought you might prefer it attached to a body, since

that is the way they are being worn this season."

Mark closed the door behind himself, put his hat on the table, and then followed Caroline into the sitting room and sat down. "Very tidy in here," he remarked politely. "You've got all the debris cleared away?"

"I suppose you know all about it," said Caroline.

"Well, in actual fact, I don't. I know the gist of it—insults and blows and hurling lamps. He had to give up his coat, by the way. Great ugly gash in the shoulder. His waistcoat and shirt were salvageable, and his skin, I'm sure you'll be glad to know, not irreparably damaged."

"I am very sorry to hear that," she replied vehemently.

"My goodness," commented Mark in his mildest tone, "I take it you're still a trifle put about?"

"I'm still bloody furious." Caroline's expression changed abruptly. "Mark, he called me a prostitute," she told him in a wan little tone.

Mark's face registered skepticism.

"Well, I mean, he didn't say it directly, but he . . . he meant it. He wasn't even angry. When he was angry, he said much worse things, but that was different."

"So?" said Mark.

"So? *So?* So maybe I am, sort of, but it's damned unfeeling of him to throw it up in my face. You may say it; I may say it; but why should he say it?"

"Why shouldn't he?"

Caroline's righteous indignation subsided. "Because it hurts me."

"Now that," agreed Mark, "is a reason. It was, as you say, damned unfeeling and deserved some sort of reaction. But darling, you don't slap a man in the face, not a man like Price. Especially," he grimaced, "not twice, deliberately."

Caroline traced a pattern in the carpet with her toe.

"And then you hurled bits of furniture at him, shrieking and cursing like a fishwife. At least he says you did. Did you?"

"Yes. When he spanked me. And his curses outdid mine by a long chalk, let me tell you."

Mark threw back his head and laughed. "He *spanked* you? He didn't tell me that! By God, what a battle it must have been! I'll bet the neighbors loved it. I'd have loved it myself."

"You are a cad, a thorough-going cad," declared Caroline. "I wish you will leave."

"Now don't fly up into the boughs. Somebody's got to see the funny side of all this. You both act as if it were the end of the world."

There was a short silence.

"Mr. Butterfield, you got in this house on false pretenses. You said you hadn't come on Geoffry's behalf, but you did."

He shrugged. "Perhaps so. But believe me, sweeting, I didn't think I was. I can, however, always revert to my original plan. Contrary to the common belief, there is no honor among thieves. Or is 'All's fair in love etc.' the appropriate maxim here?" He gave her the benefit of his most charming smile. "Tell me, pretty Caro, would you listen if I were to plead my own case and let Price take the consequences of his shameful misconduct?"

He leaned forward to put one hand on her knee and to take her chin with the other. "Hmm, would you listen, lovely woman?"

"Oh, Mark, at least let me give him a decent burial!" cried Caroline, and burst into tears.

Dismayed, he got up and tried to take her comfortingly into his arms. She shrank from him.

"Don't touch me; don't be kind to me. Just be quiet and I'll stop in a moment," she sobbed.

Mark sat down and waited, watching her. After a moment she got a grip on herself. She accepted his handkerchief with a wavering smile and blew her nose.

"Just as I thought," he nodded.

Caroline gazed at him guiltily.

"Don't despair, darling. He's not ready to finish it; he's only gone off in a start, and, you know how he is, he's mortified at having had a scene for all the neighbors to buzz about."

Caroline was not convinced, and she was not sure she was going to forgive him, but she was interested in having a chance to. "What did he say about coming to see me?"

Mark laughed. "He was *very* pompous. 'Oh valiant warrior,' I said, 'have you a word for La Belle Dame Sans Merci, upon whom I plan to call this afternoon—unless you expect to be there yourself?' His word was 'I'll go there when I damned well please, and it isn't going to be very bloody soon'—or perhaps it was 'bloody well please' and 'damned soon,' but you get the general drift. Now that is a hopeful sort of message. What would be bad, from your point of view, would be wry lassitude, indicative of indifference. You must remember, my love, that Price is not a ladies' man, in a general way, and he's not accustomed to these sorts of things. Once he's digested the idea of a scene and a little shouting, he'll come round."

Mark paused and gave her a regretful look, which traveled frankly from her golden curls to her little green slippers. "You know, I am not partial to thin little slips, but there is something indescribably alluring about you. It's intensified by the knowledge that you've turned that cold fish Price into a hot-blooded madman. What the hell do you do to him?"

Caroline replied with one well-chosen word.

Mark was unflappable. He laughed without the smallest indication of shock. "Of course, my love, but so do most

women, sooner or later. The question is *how* do you do it?''

''Sorry, sir; no free demonstrations this week,'' she shrugged.

Mark bowed his head in acceptance of defeat. ''So back to the embassy,'' he smiled. ''Would you like my advice on the restoration of amicable relations?''

Caroline shrugged again.

''I should say, give him a day or two,'' he told her, ''then go catch him at home. Beg his pardon for slapping him, then he'll beg your pardon for striking you, then you'll beg his pardon for pelting him with dangerous missiles. And cry. He'll kiss away your tears, and you'll end up in bed. Going to bed after a squabble is marvelous. It almost makes the squabble worth having!''

Caroline stared. Go to Geoffry? Beg his pardon? He should beg *her* pardon!

Mark mistook her look of incredulity. ''You'll see, sweetheart, going to him will sooth his ruffled vanity. You needn't be subservient; just apologize for smashing him in the face.''

''I'll be damned first,'' exclaimed Caroline, pounding a little white fist on the arm of her chair. ''I'll be damned and fry in hell before I apologize!''

''Oh,'' murmured Mark, ''then there's hope for me yet.''

Geoffry did come round, as Mark had prophesied, but he didn't come round fast enough for Caroline. She gave him a total of exactly one week, and then she left.

''Left?'' said Geoffry. ''What do you mean, left?''

''Gone, sir,'' replied the landlord. ''Decamped. Not to put too fine a gloss on it, scarpered is what she done.''

''Scarpered? Where in bloody hell did she scarper to?''

To the delight of the landlord with the benevolent

countenance, Mr. Price's forbidding equanimity had deserted him.

"That I can't say, sir," was the landlord's dignified response. "She never told me," he hastened to add, as Mr. Price's face took on an expression of menace.

"Well, if she didn't tell you, dammit, whom did she tell?"

"Didn't tell nobody here, sir. We're all wondering, same as you."

Geoffry scowled. "It's none of your business to wonder."

The landlord looked apologetic, hypocritically.

"Don't go away," ordered Geoffry and headed up the stairs.

He was back again in three minutes. "You're right. She's cleared out, bag and baggage. And left me with a lot of God-damned bills to pay, I shouldn't wonder."

The landlord took this cue. "Now that you mention it, sir, there's a little matter of a, um, broken lamp, and a shaving pitcher, which need replacing."

It was not a felicitous subject. Geoffry glared at the landlord and waved a finger under his nose. "There is also a little matter of the rent, which is paid through next month. If I don't find her, you may be sure I'll be back to collect what's due me. You had better be able to produce it!"

"Two weeks notice, sir," cried the landlord, jumping back from the ferociously waving finger which threatened to do him an injury. "I'm entitled to two weeks notice!"

"Well, you've got it," Geoffry growled. "My man will be round for my things," he added, referring to his nightdress, dressing gown, several shirts, and a shaving kit which had been unceremoniously left behind.

He stalked off.

Caroline was at that point a very short distance away, sitting in Mark's dressing room.

"I shan't tell you," she said flatly. "If you know where I am, he'll get it out of you somehow, if he wants to, and I don't choose that he shall be able to find me. I'll go to him, in the words of the Prophet, when I bloody well please, and it isn't going to be too damned soon. Or was it 'damned well please' and 'bloody soon'?"

Mark made a gesture of indifference. "As you like, sweetheart. But he's not going to be best pleased when he finds you've walked out on him."

Smiling pertly, Caroline added, "He's not going to be best pleased when my creditors start banging on his door either. But isn't this a lovely new dress?"

She pirouetted for Mark's benefit and patted his cheek when he said obligingly, "Charming."

"But what if he refuses to pay? You can't keep up that sort of game for long."

"I can't keep it up at all," she admitted. "Such a nipcheese as he is! I couldn't have got the dress if I hadn't ordered it a week ago with his permission."

There was a muffled chuckle from Mark, who reflected that Geoffry was not such a fool with women as he appeared, at least in one respect. While Caroline glared resentfully, there came a familiar footstep in the hall and a deceptively polite knock which electrified both occupants of the room. Caroline bolted for the bedchamber. "If you let him know I'm here, Mark," she whispered, "I'll tell him you've been trying to take advantage of me. He'll kill you," she smiled complacently, beginning to unbutton the front of her dress.

"Don't do that!" Mark looked decidedly alarmed.

"If he finds me, you'll see what a state I'll be in," Caroline threatened. She closed the bedroom door as

Mark, rearranging his features, opened the door to Geoffry.

"Sorry, old man. Bill's out," he began to apologize for being long in coming.

Unconcerned with Bill, Geoffry burst out, "That damned wench has bolted!"

"Bolted?" Mark was stalling for time. "Where to?"

"That's what I'd like to know. The landlord, damn his beady little eyes, doesn't know, and she's taken Penny away."

At Mark's look of innocent surprise, Geoffry snorted. "Don't give me that butter-wouldn't-melt look. If she needed help she'd come to you. You're the best bet, next to Silling's. She isn't there. Now tell me, Butterfield, do you know where she's gone?"

Mark shook his head. "She wouldn't give me her direction."

Geoffry sat up abruptly. "She *has* been to you! When?"

"Not long ago."

Geoffry gave him a suspicious glance. "When, not long ago? Mark, she wouldn't be here now?" The last question was put in a hard, dangerous tone.

"Oh, take a damper, man," said Mark with a satirical smile. "Don't look murder at a man in his own home. It's discourteous."

"You wouldn't mind if I took a quick glance behind that closed door, would you?" He gestured toward the bedroom.

Oh, my God, thought Mark. "Go on," he said. "Search the place. Scour the cupboards; ransack the wardrobe; rummage under the furniture!"

Shamed, Geoffry gave the bedroom a cursory look while Mark calculated the distance between the chair in

which he was sitting and the hall door.

"Very well. I beg your pardon." Geoffry closed the bedroom door and returned to his seat. To Mark's horror, there was a long fold of bright pink fabric caught between the door jamb and the door. Caroline must have been standing behind it. Fascinated, Mark watched as the pink stripe shortened by inches, disappearing.

"Damned trollop," murmured Geoffry, staring at his fingernails.

The cautious movement of the pink stripe stopped for a moment, and then the rest of the fabric vanished with an angry snap.

"What the devil are you looking at?" Geoffry twisted round to follow Mark's eyes.

"Nothing. Just staring into space, thinking. She's not a trollop, you know, Price. There's certainly a difference between a faithful mistress and a plain trollop."

"How do I know she's faithful? If she's so faithful, where is she?"

In my bedchamber, thought Mark. Marvelous. "So you've had a bit of a disagreement, and she's taken a bit of a holiday," he observed. "That doesn't make her a trollop."

Geoffry leaned back tiredly. "No. What makes her a trollop is that she earns her livelihood lying on her back. Why pretty it up? She's a whore; just because she happens to be my whore doesn't change that. Damn her anyway; she's begun to be more trouble than I want to put up with. When I get my hands on her . . ."

"Not bloody likely," interrupted a carefully controlled female voice.

Geoffry threw Mark a malevolent glance before he turned his eyes on Caroline, standing livid in the bedroom door.

"You'll not get your hands on me again, ever, you

miserable ingrate," she went on, her voice beginning to crack. "I'm not a trollop and a whore when you're in my bed, half mad with pleasure, begging me to—"

"Hold your tongue, you vulgar slut," he whispered, enraged and frozen in his chair.

"No," Caroline continued, "then I'm your heart's joy, your treasure, your dearest love. Of course, that's just when you're too drunk to know what you're saying. Sober, you despise me. Despise yourself then, too! Whore, indeed," she shouted, whirling out the door. "You beastly lecher!"

And everybody in the building, thought Mark, will think she means me. He reflected that the carrying power of her magnificent voice would do a drillmaster proud.

Geoffry looked from the door to Mark in a sort of daze.

"Go after her, imbecile!" Mark cried.

When Geoffry disappeared, Mark bolted to the window to see what would happen. He was not surprised to see a number of other heads similarly disposed. In the street, Geoffry caught up to Caroline and spoke to her in a voice too low to be heard. She ostentatiously shook off his arm. She gazed up at him with her bright blue eyes, looking like the prettiest of china dolls.

Then she said, in a voice ringing with contempt and clearly audible to every one of the window-hanging gossips, "Kiss my arse."

Geoffry went red, then white, then red again as his audience burst into a roar of laughter. When he appeared in Mark's room to collect his hat, Mark was weakly pouring himself a brandy and trying to suppress his mirth.

"Here, you need this," he said, handing Geoffry the glass and pouring another.

Geoffry tossed it off all at once. "Thanks," he said. "Good afternoon, Butterfield."

"I never had her, Geoffry. I promise you. She was only

here on a social call to talk about you.''

Geoffry turned at the door. ''Believe me, Mark, I don't care.'' He shook his head slowly. ''I don't care at all.''

''You're a hard-hearted mortal. It half killed her to hear you say what you did about her. Can't you see the chit's crazy in love with you, Price?''

His pale, cold face took on a pained expression. ''Don't be a fool, Mark. She's no more in love than I am,'' he said, then he turned on his heel and left.

''May be,'' observed Mark to the empty air. ''I hadn't thought of that before, but I daresay it's quite true. Poor fellow.''

He shrugged and downed his brandy. He had no illusions that Geoffry would come round this time.

IX

Three days later Mark came home to be greeted rather stiffly by his landlady with the intelligence that ''that young woman'' was waiting for him in the parlor.

''I'd not a' let her in, mind, Mr. Butterfield, for I can't abide of the sort of goings-on as we had here t'other day—though it was the most excitement we've had in a twelvemonth, since Mrs. Gantry's parlor curtains caught fire, and that comical, which Mrs. Gantry's curtains wasn't—but she was that forlorn, like, Mr. Butterfield, besides being such a pretty little thing, which I don't doubt Mr. Price has used her hardly, if you don't mind my saying so. Anyways,'' concluded Mrs. Green with a forced expression of severity, ''she's here, and I'm sure you'll behave yourself, Mr. Butterfield, as a gentlemen

ought, which I'm sure you know, and give no reason for my other lodgers to come complaining."

Mark assured her he would be careful to offer no offense, then slipped into the parlor. "Good afternoon, darling," he said cheerfully.

Round the corner of a deep easy chair appeared an anxious little face. It was forthwith transformed by a smile. "You're not angry with me?" Caroline asked meekly.

"Angry?" He came and dropped a kiss on her hair. "My dear child, you gave me the best laugh I have had this age. Of course, Mrs. Green is not eager for a repeat performance."

"She's a dear," put in Caroline.

"So she is. That's included in the rent money. Here, now, let's slip upstairs while dear Mrs. Green is obligingly at the back of the house."

This they did with dignified dispatch.

"Come, my love," said Mark, once they were comfortably settled, "can I offer you tea, brandy, or—" He peered dubiously at a colored bottle. "—ratafia?"

"Yes, please, brandy," replied Caroline absently. "Mark?"

"Mm?"

"Did Geoff go off in an apoplexy?"

Mark handed her a substantial draught of brandy. "If I were you, little angel-faced spitfire, I should not bother my adorable head further about Geoffry Price."

She gave him a strange glance.

"Oh, my dear, it was beautifully played though," he went on, "you were magnificent. It is only a pity he interrupted you when he did. I should dearly have loved to know what it is he begs you to do in his moments of passion. But never mind. Should you like to go into the

theater? I'm sure Estella Silling and I could arrange an audition for you."

Caroline raised her eyebrows. "Maybe. Maybe. You really mean it?"

He nodded. "Something to do, bit of an income, chance to meet people."

"Meet men, you mean. I don't know. I'm not sure I'm cut out for the profession." Whether she meant acting or men was not clear. She looked into the distance for a moment. Mark watched her. Then she gave a little smile. "Magnificent, was I?"

"You could have London at your feet, my dear, as an actress."

"Geoffry Price, too?"

Mark perched on the arm of her chair. "Forget him, Caroline. Best foot forward and all that. He's a bygone. Even I wouldn't come back to you after a scene like that, and I haven't any more pride than you could put in a thimble and have space left over."

She looked up into his face with eyes that were suddenly hard and brilliant. "You don't understand, Mark. I don't want him back. I want him at my feet, so that I may spit in his face."

"It seems to me," he pointed out, lightly touching her hair, "that you expressed your disenchantment in fairly unmistakable terms the other day."

She tossed her head. "Oh, yes, and he was annoyed at being made to look like a fool. But it is not enough for him to be annoyed; I want him to be hurt—not just to look like a fool but to feel like one." Her lip trembled a little, but her eyes had no softness in them.

Mark slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Love can be a damnable thing, can't it, darling? But you'll love others, and—"

"I don't love him," she interrupted. "I *hate* him!"

"Oh, don't waste your time. Enjoy life! Just forget him. It won't fadge, anyway, because Price is not the actress type. In fact, you're the only woman I've ever even seen him pass the time of day with, except the sort of proper, prudish creatures a man's mother would love."

"In other words, the ladies of his own class," said Caroline, "which I could never be—a vulgar slut like me."

His eyes on her mouth, Mark said, "Price is an extremely clever man of business and a good friend of mine, but he was perfectly and entirely in the wrong to apply such epithets to yourself. Don't look away, child. Are you afraid of me?" His arm tightened about her shoulders and he brought his face close to hers.

"Oh, Mark, don't be a clodpole," said Caroline.

"A clodpole," he murmured. "When I am at my most seductive! How very lowering."

There was a laugh in his voice, and Caroline thought for the hundredth time how very good-looking he was. She glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes. "You may stop looking at me in that way, sir, because I do not want to kiss you."

"Oh, yes you do," he contradicted. "I can tell by the rise and fall of your lily-white bosom."

Caroline eyed the front of her dress. "At the moment, my bosom has green stripes, and it is rising and falling at quite its normal rate." With an undeniably saucy twinkle, she added, "Almost."

Chuckling, Mark pulled her into his embrace.

Several minutes and several logistical rearrangements later, she wriggled in his lap and sighed gustily. "I just can't do it, Mark. I just can't. My heart's not in it." She sighed again.

There was a silence of several minutes. Caroline put her fingers to his lips to keep him quiet and unconsciously

traced the shape of his mouth. He kissed her fingertips with blissful concentration until she abruptly balled her fist and pounded on his shoulder. He started, with a look of some irritation.

"Suppose," said Caroline slyly, "I became a lady of his own class?"

"Who? Oh. Can't be done."

He bent his head to kiss her neck, and covered her breasts with caressing hands.

"Why not?" she asked brightly. "Why not, Mark?" She grabbed him by the hair and lifted his head. "Do pay attention! Why not?"

Mark made a cross-eyed grimace of exasperation. They both laughed.

"Very well," he said. "I give up for the time being. I'll pay attention. What were you talking about?"

"I said, suppose I became a proper lady; I could have my revenge on Geoff then, right? But you said it can't be done, and I asked why."

"I said that? I take it back. One needs no more than impeccable manners, an irreproachable reputation, at least one backer of undisputable probity and social position, and a substantial amount of money. Unfortunately, my love, you have not got any of those things. Therefore, I suggest we repair to my bedroom and discuss your alternate course."

"Mark." There was a note of apology in her voice. "I think I could do it."

"Darling, I *know* you can do it!"

"Not that. I think I could become a lady."

"I have just given you several very good reasons why you could not," he pointed out.

"But Mark, I have a scheme."

Caroline declined to elaborate that evening on the

ground that the scheme needed to be better worked out. But two days following, she came dashing in at supper-time, all aglow. "Boiled capon? How divine, how utterly divine! Thank you, I'd love some. Now listen, Mark, to what a splendid job I've made of it!"

"Of what?" asked Mark, pouring wine tranquilly and wishing he thought cold boiled capon utterly divine.

"Of my First Chance! My chance to get a start on Condition Number One."

"Perhaps, darling, if you would just jog my memory? Which condition was number one?"

"Manners, Mr. Butterfield. Impeccable manners." Caroline picked up her fork with affected daintiness and poked gingerly at a carrot. "Just listen and you'll understand it all in a moment. Now, you remember Captain Tilsitt at Vauxhall, the wispy little fellow who made such a muddle of being introduced to me?"

Mark remembered.

"Well, I have met him in the park a time or two, and once when we were talking about London, what a jolly place it is and so on, he told me about a relative of his in the country who was looking for a maid."

She paused triumphantly. Mark looked baffled.

"I mean, she's in the country now, but she's having trouble finding a maid to suit her and she's even thinking of journeying to London, which she doesn't much like, in order to find one. So of course I jumped at it."

"Jumped at it," repeated Mark, lost in the labyrinth of logical hopscotch.

"The chance to be this lady's maid in the country. She's likely to take me on, because she's been having trouble finding someone, and I can learn manners from her. She can be my model to study from. And in the country, Condition Number Two—"

"Two?"

"Reputation, booby, will be fixed up. Who knows me? Nobody. Who'll remember me in six or eight months with new manners? Less than nobody. Unless Geoff sabotages me."

"Now be fair, Caroline. I don't think he's likely to blab it about you were his mistress."

Caroline shrugged defiantly.

"Very well, sweetheart; we needn't go into that. But what is this 'lady'? How do you know she's a lady? Some of the country gentry are not at all well-bred."

Caroline took a boiled potato. "Silly man. I thought of that. Captain Tilsitt assured me she is a very well-bred sort, and he, you know, is a proper prune. Her father is a gentleman, a scholar, and he's made sure to give her an excellent education."

"Hmm," said Mark. "She has a father, eh? How about her mother?"

"No mother. But the father is a serious scholar who spends his days engaged in research and does *not* chase the maids, hard as it must be for you to imagine such a thing."

He pulled a wry face. "I know one of those—country squire, very solemn and tedious. I guess it'll do. So she's going to take you on, this lady, on the say-so of that little milksop Tilsitt?"

"Mark, I beg you will not say unpleasant things about Captain Tilsitt. He has been very kind to me. And we don't know yet if she'll engage me. I'm to go to her and find out."

"I see. But there are a few things I don't yet understand. How did you convince Tilsitt you want to trade Price's protection for the post of an abigail? Did you tell him you reformed?"

Caroline's eyes sparkled. "You'll like this part; it was

the most fun of the whole interview. I was very sweet and pathetic. He had no way of knowing for sure I was Geoff's mistress, of course, so I told him I had only just come to London a few weeks ago. 'Mr. Price had been very kind to me, and I thought . . . I thought'—you have to imagine a lot of pitiful innocence here—'he was fond of me, but, oh, Captain Tilsitt, when I found out what he . . . what he really wanted. . . ! Captain Tilsitt, London is no place for a poor girl, alone and friendless! I . . . I must leave here! I am not proud, Captain Tilsitt. I want only to find a post where I can lead a clean life of honest work, with good, decent people whom I can learn to emulate.'—I got that last bit out of a book—'Captain Tilsitt, I am so afraid Mr. Price will . . . will . . . Captain Tilsitt, what can a girl do? You can have no idea . . .' " She gazed at Mark with agonized blue eyes, flushed with embarrassment, breathing hard in the extremity of her distress.—"Oh, wait, also a hand pressed to the bosom, so."—She put a hand to her breast in a way that made it impossible for an observer to avoid thinking warm thoughts. " 'Oh, Captain Tilsitt, I implore you, give me a chance to get away before it's too late!' "

By this time Mark was laughing so hard Caroline could hardly continue with her recital, and she began to laugh, too.

"I only barely could keep myself from throwing in the old line about a fate worse than death," she told him.

"Give up this plan, sweetheart," cried Mark. "Stay in London and go into the theater, I implore you, Miss Dancer! My theatrical friends will love me forever for sending them such a discovery!" He subsided after a moment into chuckles. "But he believed you?"

She nodded.

"He's even more of a gudgeon than he looks!"

"I assure you, Mark, I'd have convinced even an old cynic like you, had you met me only once at Vauxhall Gardens."

"But we were all drunk as lords at Vauxhall Gardens," objected Mark. "Including you. That's hardly the way sheltered young women behave."

" 'That dreadful Mr. Price,' continued Caroline. 'He assured me there was not a drop of alcohol in that punch, Captain Tilsitt, but I truly believe there was. It's a scandal! And him seeming such a gentleman, too!' "

Caroline raised eyes of incredible innocence to Mark's face as, under the table, she rubbed her knee salaciously against the inside of his leg.

"Did you give Tilsitt the benefit of a little persuasion under the table?" he asked.

"God, no! That was only to illustrate for you my powers of dissimulation," she laughed.

"I'm convinced. So you made him believe you. And what are your plans now?"

"Well, there's Condition Number Four—the money. I've sold everything I had, Mark, clothes, everything. And I shall give you the money to invest for me. It isn't much without Penny, but if you'll sell her, too, it should amount to something worthwhile. Then when I come back from the country I'll have at least enough to establish myself. Will you do that for me?"

"Volontiers," said Mark.

"Thank you." She smiled. "I'm not going to ask you what it means, either, you show-off."

"One last question. What about—"

"I know," interrupted Caroline. "Condition Number Three, the person of probity and position to introduce me. I'll just have to see about that when I get back. I have months yet. And while I'm gone, you may be sure I shall

be the model of respectability, the very model."

"How deadly. You may be sure I shan't visit you."

"I am sure. Because you will not know where I am."

He looked startled. "You're not going to disappear into thin air?"

"I am. And you needn't think Tilsitt will tell you, in the last resort, because I told him if Geoffry found out what he'd done for me he would challenge him to a duel." Caroline laughed gaily. "He looked so frightened! I don't think he'd tell anyone he ever knew me. In fact, he wanted to back out of the whole business, but I cried and told him he'd given me his word as a gentleman."

"You did a fine job of blackening poor old Geoffry's character, didn't you, little minx? A bloodthirsty libertine, no less!"

She smiled.

X

Having sold everything but an absolute minimum of clothing, and resolved to pinch pennies as never before, Caroline set out late next afternoon on foot from her temporary Cheapside lodgings with a small carpetbag in one hand and a modest reticule in the other. The latter, a brown cloth bag devoid of any frivolous adornment such as ribbon or embroidery, contained the two most important things in the word, so far as Caroline was now concerned: one was Captain Tilsitt's letter of introduction; the other was her fare for the mail coach as far as Beckhampton, some three or four miles from Willowview, her destination. She was expected, Tilsitt had assured her, and

would be met, but it was comforting to know that three miles was a short enough distance that she could walk it alone if there should prove to have been any misunderstanding. On the whole, Caroline had begun to view the whole project as something of a jolly adventure, and she stolidly refused to consider what she would do if Tilsitt's Miss Ernhaven declined to take her on.

It was shortly before seven in the evening when she began the two-mile trek to the White Horse Cellars in the West End, from which the mail would leave promptly at half-past eight. Caroline tramped the familiar route to Charing Cross and through St. James, not the park this time, but the streets. She stopped to gaze with a new envy at the handsome houses that ringed the square and the luxurious equipages that waited, horses blowing, attendants lounging, for their owners to appear to be conveyed to some elegant, trivial evening's entertainment so sumptuous Caroline could barely imagine it. For a moment she wavered, considered staying in London and going onto the stage as Mark had suggested. Actresses could attain quite dizzying heights of social prominence; Caroline might go on to be the mistress of a Somebody—an earl, maybe, or even a duke. Why not? Or think of Nell Gwynn!

As she turned the corner slowly into King Street, a door opened behind her, flooding the dim grey street with light. There was a peremptory hail from within, and a black and bronze-colored carriage pulled up, the coachman now seated erect, the footmen no longer slumped forward on their elbows. Pausing to watch, Caroline saw a third liveried footman step out to stand respectfully beside the house door. When the barouche stopped squarely in front of the entrance, a footman sprang from behind to open the door and let down the steps, just as a middle-aged man stepped briskly out of the house. He wore a satin-lined opera cape that swirled around him as he descended two or

three stairs onto the street, and several rings glittered on his fingers when he pulled his cape gracefully into the carriage after him. The footman smartly folded up the stairs and closed the door with dispatch, then ran to jump up behind as the carriage moved smoothly off. Caroline stared, fascinated by the clockwork precision and the effortless grandeur of it. What, she wondered, would it be like to be the mistress of a man like that? He hadn't been young or particularly handsome, but he had been Somebody.

"See here, now," observed a threatening voice, "you can't hang about here. This ain't Drury Lane, my girl. Be off with you!"

Flushing invisibly in the poor light, Caroline moved away down the street without giving the offensive speaker so much as a glance. As she did so, she heard a clock strike eight. Startled, she hurried round the corner and up into Piccadilly, arriving at the White Horse just in time to claim her seat on the mail. An officious guard, resplendent in his royal livery of scarlet and black, ordered her to see to her luggage immediately. When it became clear that she had no luggage, he blighted the remnants of her self-confidence with a withering, "Oh, I see," and then forgot her existence.

Caroline approached the carriage with determination. The inside seats were taken already by a fat old woman who looked as nervous as Caroline felt and by two businessmen with a straggling boy of about ten; the younger of the two men wore a spotless pale-colored coat and looked as though he would rather jump in the river than sit outside. Caroline smiled at the little boy, who whispered to his companions that he wished he might sit on the roof, but the elder silenced him with a severe look and the younger began, very reluctantly, to offer his seat to Caroline. Disgusted by his gracelessness, she refused

scornfully and was helped up outside by two cheerful young gentlemen who seemed to be riding there by preference.

"You'll find it very jolly, miss," one of them hastened to assure her. "Going round a curve you must hang on tight as a limpet, but otherwise it's much better than below, cramped inside."

"You get the fresh air," chimed in the second.

"Less likely to feel queasy, if you don't mind my saying so. And it ain't cold, neither, and not a chance of rain." The young man gazed heavenward most knowledgeably.

Caroline shuddered. "I hope not."

"Not a chance," corroborated the other. "Worst we'll have to face'll be the dust, till the dew falls. But most of the dust goes behind, miss, and this driver—I know him. He's bang up to the mark, don't lag behind nobody. He doubles 'em all!"

"But you must take care, miss, not to go flying over the side into the ditch. I seen people break arms and legs that way."

Caroline looked alarmed.

"He don't mean nothing, miss," soothed the other. "He's never seen nobody break an arm in his life. And you can catch hold of me, miss, to save yourself if need be—and welcome!"

He grinned at her, and Caroline reflected that if she were a lady she would find this remark impertinent, even though the young man in question was rather attractive, so she gave him a distressed glance.

"Only a joke, miss," he mumbled. "No need to look so."

Actually, Caroline discovered that it was not so much of a joke as all that. Once they had got going and were

bowling down the rutted country roads west of London, she was obliged to forget about being a lady and to cling to both young gentlemen when the coach rounded a plodding farm cart on a sharp bend. But after a while she got more accustomed to it and learned to brace for a jolt almost before it came.

For the first stage conversation was kept at a minimum, mostly because of a solemn gentleman who had come to take the last seat. He had given Caroline a dubious glance, and his dour countenance had effectively quashed the exuberance of the two young men. They all rode in silence to Hounslow, where they stopped to change horses at the Rose and Crown. When they started up again, Caroline was taken unaware. She went flying onto the dour gentleman's knees with a great flurry of legs and petticoats and was so discomfitted, with her bonnet tilted over one eyebrow and a fiery blush on her pretty cheeks, that the dour gentleman laughed in spite of himself. Then Caroline laughed as she put herself to rights, the young men laughed, and the driver looked back laughing so hard they all got the impression he had done it on purpose to break the ice.

The next few miles of the road took them across Hounslow Heath, where the inevitable stories of highwaymen were recounted with gusto: the story of Claude Duval, who spared a lady's jewels when she consented to dance a coranto with him, and the story of the successful Jack Cottington, who once netted £40,000 from an army pay coach. Although the two young men maintained they would relish some excitement of a similar nature, it was clear that everybody was glad to arrive without incident at the King's Head beyond the heath. The dour gentleman, who was not so dour after all, entertained them during this and the next few stops with an account of the sights along

the road as described by Cary in his *New Itinerary*, and although it was rather too dark to see much, it was pleasant to know what it was that was out there.

After the first few hours, the passengers lost interest in the route, and conversation lapsed as they swayed somnolently in the blackness of the night. Caroline, after demurely refusing, consented to rest her head on the shoulder of the young man next to her, but she did not dare let herself fall soundly asleep for fear she might tumble over the side. At three o'clock, she roused herself from her torpor to give a glance to the famous George and Pelican that "might well be called the Pelican, from its enormous bill." And at five she peered through the dissipating darkness at the stone cat on the battlements of St. Mary's in Marlborough. According to Mr. Cary, the statue commemorated a heroic mother cat's rescue of her kittens from a fifteenth-century fire. "Poppycock," said one of the young men. Very likely, thought Caroline, but she found it rather touching all the same.

It was six o'clock, a bleak, damp, hazy six o'clock, when the mail reached Beckhampton and pulled up at the Wagon and Horses, a thatched grey brick structure with a profusion of bay windows and a perfect torrent of smoke pouring from one of its five chimneys. Caroline wondered, as she stiffly quitted her rooftop perch for the last time, if she could afford to buy some breakfast. She decided she couldn't, but the not-so-dour gentleman procured a new-baked loaf which he distributed among the four of them, and the young gentlemen appeared with four mugs of coffee and a pot of cream. Caroline was not feeling as low as she might have been when she waved goodbye to her fellow passengers and the Bristol Mail as they left her on the stoop of the inn.

She turned with as much dignity as she could muster to ask the innkeeper if there was anyone from Willowview to

meet her. There was not. Upon being acquainted with the situation, however, the landlord assured her that someone would be along shortly and invited her inside to wait. The offer of a basin of water and a mirror was eagerly accepted. By the time Caroline had made a makeshift toilet, partaken of another slice of bread, and discussed with the garrulous innkeeper every conceivable detail of the journey, there was still no one to take her to Willowview, so she determined with some trepidation to set out by herself. Perhaps Miss Ernhaven had forgotten? Or mistaken the date? Perhaps she had found somebody else in the meantime? Perhaps it had all been a hoax from the beginning!

Caroline needn't have worried. As she neared the first bend in the road, a pony cart came dashing round, driven at breakneck speed by a lad of about fourteen, who reminded her for all the world of Tommy Spencer and made her feel immediately at ease.

"Oh, miss," shouted the boy, hauling back on the sturdy brown pony and twisting his head round as he shot past her, "you must be Miss Thorpe, are you?"

Miss Caroline Skuttle, alias Dancer, alias Jennifer Thorpe, replied that she was.

"Na, miss, I'm sorry you was kept waiting," said the boy, as the pony plunged in vexation. "You see, Mollie—she's the one with the black spots, mastiff, don't you know—she just whelped, and I was watching, helping, you know, as it's her first, and I forgot to mind the time when the mail was expected. But I druv like a loony soon as I remembered."

Caroline laughed, handed over her bag, and climbed into the pony cart with minimum assistance. How many puppies were there, she asked, what colors were they, and what sex each one. As the pony walked along, recovering from his mad sprint, Caroline made her first conquest in

her new career. When she had run out of questions about puppies, she drew the boy out about the countryside. Ben, as he informed Caroline he was called, had been born on the Ernhaven estate.

"And I ain't never left home, neither, miss. West Kennet, Wiltshire, is good enough for me. Lots of fellows here are itching to go places, to Lunnon, or to Bristol and to sea, to the Spice Islands, even, but my granddad says West Kennet, Wiltshire, always been good enough for him, and that's what I say, too."

Ben had things to say on many other subjects as well, and it seemed that only a few minutes had passed when they arrived at the gates of Willowview. Caroline gazed, impressed, at the graceful grey pillars and the wrought-iron gates with the name Willowview worked into the archway above. Ben told her there really were willows, as she would plainly see when they got to the house.

"Draughty old pile of rocks," was his opinion of the house, a sprawling structure made mostly of stone in several different styles and looking curiously out of place in the neat countryside. "Cold inside, winter and summer alike. Half of it's closed up. The part that's open ain't hardly got furniture and what there is is old and gloomy stuff. But the fireplace is giant and draws fine, and the view from the back terrace is grand. Down there's the stables," he added, pointing, "which as you can see is bigger 'n we need. We only got three horses, and Gingerbread here." He gesticulated at the pony as an afterthought. "But they's prime steppers, and all of 'em drives as good as they rides, all but the master's. Very fine horses, so far as what I know, and my granddad says so, too."

Caroline wanted to know if Mollie and the puppies were in the stables and when Ben would be good enough to show them to her. Grinning hugely, he volunteered to take

her down whenever she might have a free moment. Emboldened by her affability, Ben ventured to ask if she might refrain from mentioning that he had been late in meeting her.

"If Miss Cecily asks you straight out, I'm not suggesting you should tell a whisker, but if she don't ask . . . I mean, if you don't got to say, miss . . . you know. Miss Cecily is that sort as wouldn't like to think you'd arrived in a strange place with no one to greet you."

Assuring Ben she would not betray him, Caroline reflected that Miss Ernhaven must at least be kindhearted. She felt somewhat encouraged. She shook the dust from her skirt and made for the front door. Ben gave her a dubious look which reminded her that perhaps she should enter by a servant's entrance, but Caroline decided that for her introduction she would come in proudly. No point in demeaning herself until it was necessary. On the doorstep she straightened her bonnet and wondered if she looked as tired as she felt. At least no one could accuse her, in her sandy brown cloak and darker brown dress, of looking pretentious.

This was apparently Ben's opinion, too, for as footsteps approached the door from the inside, he whispered, "I'm going to tell old Rafe he was wrong about you. He said you was going to be a pinch-faced London miss, top-lofty and thinking me and Gingerbread wasn't good enough for you. But you're a right one, miss. And *not* pinch-faced."

It was fortunate for Caroline that this ingenuous compliment fortified her for the ordeal that faced her as the door opened. A hawk-faced woman of about fifty fixed her with an unblinking stare which, Caroline was sure, took in every speck of dust and every disordered ringlet and did not approve of any of them. She had a ghastly feeling that coming in by the front door was a horrible mistake, and was quite convinced that she would be making her way

back up the road to the Wagon and Horses, on foot this time, before an hour was up. Even Ben lost his tongue before the baleful stare of this apparition, familiar as it was to him.

Steeling herself, Caroline said, "Miss Thorpe, ma'am, to see Miss Ernhaven." She had no idea what else to say, even though this awful woman must know perfectly well who she was. Who else could they be expecting at half-past seven in the morning?

"Miss Thorpe," repeated the woman, as though the very use of "miss" before her name constituted an impertinence. "Come this way, Miss Thorpe. Ben, you're wanted in the stables."

Desolated to lose the friendly face of her first new acquaintance, Caroline hazarded a moment to say, "Thank you for meeting me, Ben."

"Don't forget Mollie," he muttered, and turned to run down the steps.

The hawk-faced woman turned also to see why Miss Thorpe was not following her. Miss Thorpe followed. She was taken through a short, wide vestibule into a large main hall that bore out all Ben had said about the climate and the furnishings of the house. It was cold as only a stone building can be cold, and there was almost no furniture. Expanses of stone wall had once been covered with warming tapestries, but were now mostly bare. Here and there around the hall was a heavy chair or a dark wooden bench. The focal point of the room, however, was an enormous hearth. This was empty, but Miss Thorpe was cheered by the sight of the soot-stained hearthstone, which proved that sometimes a hearty fire roared there. She sat herself down on the bench indicated to her and watched the retreating back of the hawk-faced woman disappear down a corridor.

Immediately, the front door opened and Ben dashed in.

"Don't be afraid of her, miss. Her name's Mrs. Watts, and she's the housekeeper. She's not so bad as she looks, only when she's trying to scare you. It's because you're so pretty, miss. Goodbye."

Ben bolted out.

Almost immediately, Mrs. Watts reappeared, saying that Miss Ernhaven would see Miss Thorpe in the small library. If she would care to freshen up. . . . The crisp, cool tone, expressed a world of disapproval. Caroline couldn't decide if she disapproved of freshening up or just of Caroline freshening up.

As she was ushered round a corner, she saw that this corridor led into a newer wing, awkwardly joined to the main hall. Even this newer part could hardly be called new, but it had less of the forbidding medieval quality of the central foyer. Caroline was led up a flight of stairs and into a small square room with a basin and running water. As she splashed a little on her face and tidied her hair, Mrs. Watts looked stone-faced over her shoulder. She didn't dare ask for a glass, but patted her hair down as best she could and then pronounced herself freshened. Mrs. Watts took her back down the stairs, and they continued on through the new wing.

Caroline had time for a timid glance into a handsome drawing room, a curious stare through a perfectly illogical little window blocked by some sort of creeper, and then she found herself before the open door of a book-lined room which she rightly took to be the small library. At the sight of this bright, warm chamber Caroline's spirits soared. Although here, too, there was little furniture of a conventional sort, the floor was covered by a red oriental carpet like nothing Caroline had ever seen before, and a healthy fire danced in the fireplace. There were tall windows with light white curtains and gold draperies. In one of the windows sat a brown-haired girl working on a piece

of needlework. When Mrs. Watts said, "Miss Thorpe," in a sepulchral tone, the brown-haired girl stood up.

"Miss Thorpe, I am glad to see you. I trust our Ben met you as he was charged to do?"

"Yes, he did, Miss Ernhaven." Caroline smiled at the remembrance of the galloping pony and the harassed face of the boy.

"Ben is a good fellow," returned Miss Ernhaven, with an answering smile, "though he does have, shall we say, enthusiasms, which sometimes delay him in the accomplishment of his duties."

It was clear Ben's dereliction had already been discovered, and Caroline hoped he wouldn't think she had been responsible.

"Well, shall we sit down, Miss Thorpe?" went on Miss Ernhaven. "I have no doubt you are fatigued from your journey. Tea is on its way."

As she took her seat opposite Miss Ernhaven, Caroline looked into her face and realized that her initial impression had been correct. The girl could barely be more than twenty and was almost certainly no older than Caroline. Yet she seemed perfectly easy and in control of everything. Yes, thought Caroline, this is the sort of lady I should like to be, not a cringing violet perpetually on the point of succumbing to the vapors.

Miss Ernhaven made quiet remarks in a soft, well-modulated voice and asked agreeable, intelligent questions about Caroline's journey until the appearance of tea and scones, brought by a servant who could barely conceal her curiosity about this London "miss" Mrs. Watts had harumphed over so skeptically. The girl was speedily dismissed.

Miss Ernhaven took a cup of tea and a scone Caroline suspected she didn't want but ate only so Caroline would not feel uncomfortable about eating. Then she looked up

with soft grey eyes and said, "I find it very obliging in you to have come so far without having had anything settled. I hope you appreciate that since you did not quote any previous references, I felt it advisable to interview you in person before making any promises. Captain Tilsitt wrote me of you. He said he was sure I should like you, and he would send a letter with you for me."

Caroline produced the letter from her reticule. Miss Ernhaven read it through quickly.

"The Captain says you have a story to tell me, which he is not as a gentleman at liberty to divulge, but which he feels will convince me of your good faith, in spite of your lack of references." There was a twinkle of humor in Miss Ernhaven's eyes which showed that she would reserve judgment until she had heard the story herself. Caroline could see she would not be such easy game as the impressionable Captain.

Since Caroline had spent some time yesterday laboriously steaming open Tilsitt's letter and replacing the wafer so meticulously as to defy detection, Miss Ernhaven's synopsis was hardly necessary, but of course Miss Ernhaven was not to know that. There had been a little more to the letter than she had quoted, but still there was no hint as to the particulars of Caroline's story, only that it was of a delicate nature. Caroline had developed two plans: one was to own she had never been a lady's maid before, but that involved the thorny question of what she *had* been; the other involved a well-acted tale of woe, similar in purport to that she had told the Captain, but different in detail. Caroline decided on Plan Two. She lowered her eyes and began.

"Miss Ernhaven, I realize I am in a very awkward position regarding references. I have been employed in two households with . . ." Caroline hesitated. She gazed up at the tranquil young lady with the fine grey eyes.

Dignity, my girl. What you need here is dignity and simplicity, she told herself bracingly. "I am very much embarrassed, Miss Ernhaven," she said in a slightly smothered voice, but then she raised her head stoutly and went on. "I have had trouble with the gentlemen in the households in which I have been employed, and my two mistresses have been, perhaps understandably, more inclined to believe ill of me than of the members of their own families." Her eyes dropped again. "Need I explain further, Miss Ernhaven?"

"I think you must," she answered gently but firmly. "I need to know more of the specific circumstances before I can make any sort of judgment, Miss Thorpe, although you may be sure I sympathize with your reticence on the subject."

Oh, dear, thought Caroline. I shall have to work with this one. The Captain was child's play.

"In the first case, Miss Ernhaven, Mr. . . . If you don't object, I'll not mention names?" Caroline looked plaintively at Miss Ernhaven and Miss Ernhaven agreed that names were not necessary at this point.

"Thank you," said Caroline. She smiled a little wearily. "The master of the house, then, engaged me when his wife was not present. He said he had her confidence and if I was acceptable to him I should be acceptable to her. That seemed to be true, Miss Ernhaven, for madam liked me well enough, until she discovered that the master liked me better than he ought. Or rather, I don't know, Miss Ernhaven, if he liked me, but he . . . he was most peculiar in his attentions and his intentions were unmistakable. I thought perhaps I should go to madam and explain, ask for a character, and leave the house before the storm broke, but I'm sure you appreciate the difficulty involved. She would surely have pressed me to give a reason for leaving, and—well, the next story shows what was the

result of trying to make a mistress believe such a thing. At any rate, in this first case, Miss Ernhaven, my mistress became aware of the . . . designs of her husband, and went off in a start. She told me that since it was he who had engaged me, it was from him I should seek a character, and with or without a character I was to be out of the house in three days." By this time Caroline was well into her story, and her eyes flashed with indignation. "Fool that I was, I did apply to the master for a character, thinking he might consider it enough to have lost me my position, and consent. Of course, he said he'd be delighted to write me a character—for a price." Caroline scowled and then composed her features with an effort. "So I left without a character. But I did prevail upon madam to refer me verbally to one of her friends, a widow. Not a woman I particularly cared for, but an employer at least."

Caroline sipped her tea for a moment, noticing that it was very good tea, and ate a cake. She was famished and would dearly have loved to take another, but she felt it might be less than well-mannered.

There was still the same cool look in Miss Ernhaven's eye, Caroline noticed, glancing up. It was impossible to tell whether she was believing the story or not. But by now Caroline had worked herself into such a fervor of indignation that she believed it herself and was at her most convincing. She was encouraged by a hint of compassion in the tranquil grey eyes when she asked, "Would you like me to go on, Miss Ernhaven?"

"When you're ready," said Miss Ernhaven. "Will you have another cake or a scone? You must be hungry after your long trip."

Caroline hesitated, then took one. "When I think of it," she admitted with a smile, "I am very hungry."

Mentally begging Mark's pardon for having taken him as the model in her next story, Caroline began once more.

"The widow's household was much more comfortable for some months. We got on better than I had thought we should, my mistress and I." She paused thoughtfully. "We were quite tolerably settled when the Lieutenant breezed in and sent everything topsy-turvy again. He was only to be there a few weeks, and when I saw which way the wind was blowing I thought I should be able to keep out of his path if I put my mind to it. But he was young, Miss Ernhaven, and accustomed to having his way with women. He had no wife to dissemble to and no reputation to protect. His tactics were alarmingly direct. He would waylay me in the halls, follow me out into the garden." Caroline's eyes fell, and her brow took on a pathetic little frown. "He was handsome as a god, was the Lieutenant, and he could charm the birds out of the trees. I almost fancied myself in love with him, and the world well lost, as the saying is. But," Caroline roused herself out of her reverie, "he showed such a want of respect for my feelings that it was clear no matter what grand words he sprinkled about that he did not really care for me at all."

Ah, ha! thought Caroline. A home shot!

Miss Ernhaven's eyebrows lifted ironically to disguise the pain that had sprung into the eyes beneath them.

"I know the type," she said with a little smile. "Tell me, Miss Thorpe, how did you handle it?"

Caroline smiled ruefully in her turn.

"Well, I locked my door at night and prayed for the day when he would be called back to his regiment—the same as Captain Tilsitt's. But then he began to talk of selling out and coming to live at home; the widow was his aunt, you see, and he her heir. This notion sent me into despair, and I resolved to try the course of action I had been afraid to try at . . . the other place. I went to my mistress and told her I found it necessary to leave for personal reasons. She taxed me with being in love with the Lieutenant, bantering me, I

think. But I replied quite coldly that it was not true. Annoyed in her turn, she said unkind, unfair things to the effect that since I had not succeeded in seducing him I was going off in a fit of pique!'' Quite forgetting herself, Caroline glared at Miss Ernhaven in a rage. ''*I* seduce him! *Him!* Miss Ernhaven . . .'' She broke off in a perfect fire of embarrassment and covered her mouth with her hands. ''I beg your pardon. I do beg your pardon. I am being unnecessarily frank. But what happened was that her accusation had much the same effect on me then as it has done now: I lost my temper and made accusations of my own. You'd think she'd have suspected without my telling her, for he was perfectly well-known as a terrible rake, but she doted on him. She called me . . . names and said I was lying. Then she flew in to question the Lieutenant, who denied nothing, but insisted that his intentions were entirely honorable.'' Caroline's face crumpled, and she seemed for a moment on the brink of tears, but she rallied and went on. ''Miss Ernhaven, there was not a word of truth in that, even I could see that he never meant to marry me. But his aunt seemed to think there was something in it; she sent me out of the house that same night and threatened to cut the Lieutenant off without a shilling if ever he sought me out. Nonetheless, he did slip up to my room as I was packing and apologized for having caused such a row. That was the last I saw of him, but he sent Captain Tilsitt to me when he heard of your needing somebody. When the Captain told me, Miss Ernhaven, of what a retired sort of gentleman is your father, if you'll pardon my saying so, it seemed like a godsend. I was more than willing to make the journey into Wiltshire, only on the bare chance of finding a situation. I daresay you think I'm a sort of girl to get into trouble wherever she goes, but I beg you, Miss Ernhaven, to give me a chance.''

Miss Ernhaven's expression was sympathetic in the

highest degree by the time Caroline had finished her recital. She did not really believe that Miss Thorpe was blameless in these two affairs, and she suspected that she had been more in love with the Lieutenant, and probably given him more encouragement, than she wished to admit. But Miss Ernhaven did not see what harm she could do at Willowview. If she had a mind to become mistress of the estate by charming Mr. Ernhaven, well, she would be disappointed. Unless she was willing to spend endless hours researching medieval economics, the scholarly Mr. Ernhaven would have little to say to her. And if she chose to take up with Raphael, the groom, Miss Ernhaven thought she was welcome to him. So far as Miss Ernhaven herself was concerned, Miss Thorpe was lively and bright and entertaining. Besides, Miss Ernhaven liked her, just plain liked her. There had been other candidates for the position who had been much better qualified, but it was often very lonely out in the country, and Miss Ernhaven wanted someone to be more than just a maid. She wanted a companion, and she liked this girl Jennifer Thorpe.

"It seems to me," she said, standing up, "that we might as well try each other on for size. Shall we say a month as a start? I needn't ask if you are clever at hairdressing or sewing or any of those sorts of things, for we shall find out soon enough. You will call me Miss Cecily, not Miss Ernhaven, if you don't mind, and I shall call you Jenny, also if you don't mind?"

Miss Ernhaven smiled a charming smile. Caroline's own smile was radiant.

In London, it was fully five weeks, rather longer than Mark expected, before his friend so much as mentioned his vanished mistress. Then one day as they were sensibly discussing the relative merits of two investment pos-

sibilities, Geoffry's face took on a vacant look and he interrupted the conversation.

"Mark," he said, with the air of a man signing his own death warrant, "tell me where she is."

" 'She'," repeated Mark experimentally.

"Caroline. Where is she?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, old lad, not the faintest."

Geoffry looked at him with quite alarming hostility. "The last time you didn't know where she was, she was in your bedroom," he pointed out.

Raising a cautionary hand, Mark expostulated, "Be accurate, now. I said she hadn't given me her direction, which was entirely true."

"Oh, don't quibble. I just want to know now if you know anything of her whereabouts. We've been friends too long to quarrel over this sort of damned thing."

"I agree; women are the devil for causing disputes. All I can tell you is that she's left London. I don't know where she went. She refused to tell me because she believed I should somehow let it slip to you. Which of course I should, if I knew. But I don't."

Geoffry seemed to accept this. He poured them both another brandy, and it seemed as if the subject would be dropped. But then, in a low voice, he added, "She was so . . . capricious and high-strung for those few weeks before we parted, I've been afraid she was with child."

"Oh, come now, Geoffry, if that was the case, and I knew about it, do you really think I'd keep it from you, no matter what she tried to make me promise?"

"No. No, of course not. I didn't mean I thought you knew."

Mark's snapping brown eyes could be surprisingly soft. "I did ask her. She swore she was not. She said she was quite sure. I believed her."

Geoffry's expression lightened a bit. "She denied it to me, too. I daresay it was the truth. I was paying pretty sharp attention to how things went with her in the last weeks, and it seemed pretty clear she was not. Perhaps she only imagined she was at one point. She brought it up, you see. What would I do if, you know. At first I was quite taken aback, but then. . . . I know this sounds like a damn fool thing to say, but I was rather taken by the idea. I thought it might settle her a bit. I saw her making little clothes and things, all those projects of hers. I thought of a little girl, all pink and white, with curls, you know how babies are . . . so tiny, and such a nice smell about their skin. Good God," he burst out suddenly, "this is perfectly absurd! How can you sit there and let me make such a fool of myself?"

"Tell me," said Mark, "did you ever consider marrying the girl?"

"Marrying. . . ? Oh, you mean Caroline." He frowned. "Of course not. One doesn't marry that sort of girl."

Mark shrugged. "It has been done."

"Yes, indeed, by the occasional witless romantic I suppose it has been."

"Then you considered it, but rejected the idea because you don't see yourself as a witless romantic?"

"I never considered it," said Geoffry.

"But you were in love with her."

Geoffry made a grimace of annoyance. "Butterfield, for God's sake don't drivel on to me about love. I was fond of the girl, and I don't like the idea she's in straits or got herself chopped to pieces by some butcher on account of a child of mine. Now you've reassured me that neither of those things is the case, I needn't feel responsible any longer. I'll admit her going caused a temporarily inconvenient disruption in my life. It's over now. It was perhaps a

bit of a nuisance, but I daresay it's how these things generally do come out in the end. The trouble is, one never thinks about the end in the beginning. If one did, one would very likely save oneself a lot of bother."

He swallowed the rest of his brandy, and when he changed the subject abruptly, Mark was glad to oblige him by pressing the matter no more.

"I've decided to leave Mrs. Wakefield," said Geoffry.

"Really? Why? Such a lovable old lady!"

Geoffry smiled. "Just for the change. I've found a set of rooms in Babmaes Street."

Mark raised his eyebrows. "St. James's? That *is* a change."

"And I should like you to put my name up for membership in your club. I've been there so often as your guest, I think it's time I started to pay some dues."

"Well, of course, dear boy. I've been ready to do that any time this past year and a half, as well you know."

"And," went on Geoffry, sitting back with the smugly anticipatory smile of someone about to let fall a bombshell, "Avery has offered to put me up for Brooks's."

"My *dear* fellow!"

"I must say," he admitted, "I was pretty impressed myself. It all comes about indirectly as a result of that Rajastan affair. You remember I sent round to inform Carstairs I smelt a rat and had sold out?"

Mark nodded.

"Well, apparently he had Lord Redford with him when he got my note, and Redford, you know, had a devil of a lot in that business. So for no better reason than that Carstairs told him I said to, he sold out, too, in the morning right before the whole thing was shot to hell. So he came round to meet me—Carstairs's Clairvoyant, he called me—and a few days later he invited me to dinner

along with Avery and a number of others. Well, the acquaintance has prospered—''

''I'll bet it's prospered,'' interrupted Mark. ''I'd trample on my mother's mangled corpse to make an acquaintance like that prosper.''

''Fortunately,'' said Geoffry with a smile, ''my mother is in Bath. The upshot is that Redford is to back Avery in this business of Brooks's, where Redford, of course, is rather influential.''

''Well, well. I see I shall be obliged to cultivate you, Price. Quite the man on the move.''

He shrugged. ''I daresay there'll still be someone to blackball me, but it's a bit of a thrill all the same.''

''I should think it'll go through,'' said Mark. ''Redford isn't known as a supporter of lost causes.''

''We'll see. My family may be just acceptable enough to counteract the stigma of the City, and then again, it may not. If I do get in, it will cost the earth, of course, but it should be worth it from a business point of view. And of course,'' he grinned suddenly, ''I have not your social handicap.''

''My *what*?''

''Your face, my dear fellow, and your figure. As soon as a man looks at you, or looks at a woman looking at you, he sees his wife in bed with you. But don't worry about it. I daresay I'll invite you anyway.''

''Insufferable!'' cried Mark. ''And nonsensical! I should never be such a fool as to trifle with a colleague's wife or his mistress either, come to that.''

Geoffry coughed.

''Look here, now, I have given you my word, Price—''

''I know, I know. And I even believe you. But you must admit it looked like hell. Tell me, Mark. Tell me one thing more, though I'm a sap to ask. Did she go off on her own, or was there someone to take care of her?''

"That I do know. She went off alone to investigate the prospect of a situation, a specific situation, with a lady in the country. She promised to contact me if she did not get the situation, so since I've heard nothing, I assume she did. I certainly don't believe she's in any desperate condition."

"No, she wouldn't be. She's a girl who lands on her feet," murmured Geoffry. But it was months before he could see a coarse, bedraggled drab in the street without feeling a stab of sick dread that someday it would prove to be his Caroline.

XI

So far from sinking into the depths of degradation, Caroline had made such progress in her design of self-improvement that by the start of the new year she had begun to feel quite comfortable in her new role. Her natural aptitude for mimicry had made it easy for her to ape from the beginning manners rather more demure and gently bred than her natural ones. The trick had been in learning never to forget herself. Manners, Caroline decided, were largely a matter of simple self-control. Of course there were some rules, but they were easily learned. What was hard was to develop proper behavior into a habit that governed even minor, reflex actions. To that end, Caroline practiced ladylike deportment even when she was alone.

But there was more to gentle breeding than mere manners, as Caroline quickly perceived. There was education, not the sort of basic reading and writing she had learned during her few years of formal schooling, nor yet the sort

of haphazard knowledge she had picked up by randomly devouring works of fiction. It was a well-rounded course of instruction that she felt most sorely in need of. If she were the daughter of a duke, she thought, she could get by on nothing but ignorance and grand airs, but in her position she would have to be educated. Miss Ernhaven had had just the sort of education Caroline thought would be necessary, and she set out immediately to discover not only what subjects had been covered but what books there were in the Willowview library that might be able to give her what a governess had not.

There was a large contingent of Mr. Ernhaven's books on various facets of medieval England, but the library proved to be quite comprehensive on other subjects as well. In it Caroline found history books, geography books, and books on art and music, on economics and philosophy and politics, as well as fiction, poetry, and a substantial number of undecipherable volumes in the classics, French, and Italian. Without the barest rudiments of any language but English—Caroline was not even very sure if it was Latin or Greek that was written in those odd letters—the foreign books did her little good. But she did find an Italian primer, with which she dutifully exercised her memory once she had read as much of the other subjects as she could manage at a sitting. Fortunately for Caroline's education, the Ernhavens lived a quiet, uneventful country life, and her duties as lady's maid were not very time-consuming.

It did not take Miss Cecily long to realize that books were disappearing periodically from the library shelves, and since some of them were old and valuable she soon confronted Jenny Thorpe with her knowledge of these borrowings. The ensuing confession relieved Miss Cecily's mind of the suspicion that the books were being taken for any but edifying reasons. Rather delighted than, as

Caroline had feared, disapproving, Miss Cecily encouraged her to make free use of the library, and from that time Caroline began to combine the office of maid with that of companion and then, slowly but surely, that of friend and equal.

They were much together, she and her mistress. They spent long winter afternoons both reading and talking over what they had read. Cecily, an accomplished musician, played and sang delightfully; Caroline, by dint of some effort, learned to do quite an elegant rendering of a number of songs in the lower registers and even, to a certain extent, to read music. Sometimes, on a particularly lively and amusing day, they would indulge in the frivolity of a dancing lesson. Weather permitting, they would ride, and in that exercise Caroline's innate flair and her long hours on Penny in London caused her to outshine her mistress. It never occurred to Cecily that in sharing all these activities with her maid she was inciting her to rise above her station, although the other servants would willingly have pointed it out had they dared. Under her father's tutelage, Cecily had grown up to value education for its own sake. In making of her bright companion a real friend, she was doing what an open, warm-hearted young woman in a rather lonely situation would instinctively do. Caroline's project proceeded apace, quite pleasantly.

If there was one fault to the arrangement, it was that Caroline had too much time to brood over past sorrows. Nonetheless, her seared heart had gotten fairly well on the way to mending by the time winter turned, according to the calendar if not to the thermometer, to spring. She had been vaguely considering when she would return to London, but the problem did not seem pressing as yet. Nothing outside the circumscribed world of Willowview had much reality for her anymore. She was content with her peaceful existence and she was happy with her new

friend, the first she had ever really had. She had not given up her scheme to return to Town and wreak vengeance, or even considered giving it up; it was a project for the future, for a time when life had lost its zest and needed a little spicing up. Sometime later, she thought, she would write to Mark, in the late spring or early summer perhaps. She was quite unprepared for the complication next thrust upon her by fate.

"Well, how lovely!" exclaimed Cecily, reading her mail as Caroline came into the small library with morning tea one morning toward the middle of March. "Look, Jenny, my friend Geoffry is coming home for his parents' thirtieth wedding anniversary, and he says he'll pay us a visit if it's convenient."

Mildly wondering how many men in England were called Geoffry, Caroline balanced the tray on the edge of the table and poured out two cups. She set one in front of Cecily and put the other aside for herself as Cecily continued to read.

"He's bringing Mark Butterfield with him," she went on in a slightly altered tone.

Caroline dropped the tea tray.

"Jenny!" cried Cecily.

She jumped up in exasperation, but her voice changed as she saw Caroline's face. "Oh, my dear, you needn't look so stricken. It was only an accident."

Caroline dropped to her knees on the floor, quickly righting the teapot, which had miraculously not broken, and trying to blot up the cream with a table napkin. "At least the cups were already on the table," she commented, with a bit of a shaky laugh. "If you don't object, I'll go for something to clean up the rest."

Oh, God, thought Caroline, scampering through the halls to the outmoded kitchen, there may be dozens of

Geoffrys, but there is only one Geoffry-and-Mark-Butterfield combination. My Lord, whatever shall I do?

In the event, she did nothing for the next eight or ten days but fret herself to skin and bones and listen to Cecily's cheerful recollections of the time when Geoffry's father had been rector of Marlborough parish, a position he had left not more than three years ago. They still visited back and forth, the Ernhavens and the Prices, but Cecily had not seen Geoffry for nearly a year, when last he had been traveling in connection with his London job. It was rather a good job, Cecily thought, and it seemed he was coming up in the world these days, for his mother said his letters were full of anecdotes about Lord This and Sir That and Brooks's Club. Cecily much approved of Geoffry's success, for although he might appear to be a little stiff to people who did not know him, he was really a very agreeable man with charming manners and a quiet gentlemanlike way about him that made him very easy to talk to. Cecily was sure Jenny would like him.

To turn the conversation, Caroline managed to choke out a reply to the effect that if he was a friend of Cecily's he must surely be a delightful man, and what was the other gentleman like?

Cecily lifted an eyebrow. "Mark Butterfield? Well, Mr. Butterfield is . . . a monument to coxcombry."

As Caroline looked both amused and astonished, Cecily nodded vigorously.

"He is gorgeous," she went on. "He is without a doubt the most beautiful man you have ever seen. Picture yourself, Jenny, a Greek statue, an Apollo or a Hermes, with all the colors painted in—smooth white skin, a lively flush on the cheeks, deep lustrous brown eyes, crisp black curls. Add a sparkling smile, a general air of intense vitality, a voice at once melodious and manly, and charm enough to lure the dead from the grave. *That* is Mark Butterfield."

Caroline reflected that if she did not happen to know Mark the extravagance of this description would have convinced her that Cecily must be in love with him. As it was, she merely thought the description was remarkably apt.

"And," Cecily added with some heat, "does he ever know it! Surely no one in the world can have a higher opinion of Mr. Butterfield than Mr. Butterfield himself. But it is almost, you notice I say 'almost,' pardonable when you consider what cakes people make of themselves over him!" She laughed lightly. "You'll see what a fuss every female will make over him when he comes."

By the time the gentlemen did come, Caroline had convinced the entire household she was sickening for an influenza. She coughed a great deal, while seeming to make light of the fact; she ate barely enough to keep her on her feet, which in truth was almost more than she could stomach; and she established a pattern of retreating to her room at all times when she was not specifically wanted. Cecily was naturally anxious, but when Caroline assured her she was only taking precautions against truly coming down sick and that she would be prompt to ask for a doctor if she should begin to worsen, Cecily let her alone and bustled about in preparation for the arrival of her guests. Mr. Ernhaven's contribution consisted solely of the remark, "A good boy, young Price; be glad to see him," and a promise to try to remember to come to dinner when called.

On the day of the gentlemen's arrival, Caroline slipped upstairs at the earliest opportunity and sat with her nose between the pages of *Tom Jones*, which she had of course read twice before but which was the only thing she could count on to take her mind off the activities below. It was somewhere about two o'clock in the afternoon when her bell rang and she descended the stairs with a dragging step

and a haggard look which was hardly feigned at all. Cecily informed her of the arrival of the guests and asked her, very kindly, if she thought she might be in a condition to take tea with them later in the afternoon. Appalled, Caroline stammered out as graceful a refusal as she could, saying that she was feeling ghastly and looking, she knew, even worse, and if Cecily didn't mind might she be excused from facing strangers today?

"Well, of course, my dear," said Cecily. "I thought it might amuse you, raise your spirits, you know, which is always a help when one is feeling under the weather. But if you think it would be more of a strain than a diversion, by all means I shan't require you to come."

Smiling gratefully, Caroline made her escape. As she hurried back down the hall, she heard Geoffry's voice downstairs, murmuring something inconsequential in his soft, polite baritone. In spite of the fact that she had known he was somewhere about, it came as a shock. Feeling as if she would very likely faint, Caroline fled for the servant's stairs and stood inside the little door panting for some moments before she could rouse herself to climb back up to her room. If it was going to be like this, she thought desperately, she probably would not survive the next two days.

But by dinnertime when she went down to help Cecily get dressed, she had properly prepared the pitiful speech which she would use to cry off from dinner. She was feeling braver and more resolute in general. Besides, she had made up her mind to reveal her presence to Mark and enlist his help in seeing that Geoffry did not meet up with her. She was suddenly consumed with a desire to emerge from the phantomlike existence of the past few months and, if only for a few minutes, reunite the two parts of her world, past and present. When she left Cecily's room and ran lightly down the hall to the room she had been told was

Mark's, her heart was pounding again, but this time it was with pleasurable anticipation, not with funk. She knocked softly and, when Mark's voice inside made a cordial reply, opened the door and went quietly in.

With lowered eyes she murmured, "Begging your pardon, sir, but miss told me that if there was anything you were wanting I must be very sure not to answer your bell, for you are a wicked gentleman, sir."

With a crack of laughter, Mark was across the room in three strides. He held her round the waist and kissed her soundly.

"Lud, sir, you *are* a wicked gentleman," observed Caroline. Then she threw her arms around his neck with a delighted giggle. "Oh, Mark, I am so glad to see you!"

"Likewise, I'm sure, my love."

"But you don't seem surprised," Caroline realized. "You ought to be thunderstruck!"

"I was," Mark replied, sitting down and pulling her onto his knees, "but it was three weeks ago. Would you like to hear the story?"

Caroline liked very much to hear the story.

"I was sitting in Brooks's, the guest of a certain Mr. Price, and considering whether I should go home while my luck still held, when said Mr. Price came to sit with me. We chatted of this and that, and he invited me to come home with him to Bath. His people come from Wiltshire originally, did you know that?"

"I did not know that," said Caroline. "Or rather, I didn't know it was Marlborough."

Mark smiled sympathetically and continued. " 'I've a mind to stop over at Willowview on the way,' he said, and I, remembering Miss Ernhaven's fine grey eyes and pretty white bosom, decided to accept his invitation.

"Then milksop Tilsitt chanced by, and old Geoffry

remarked with a frown, 'I'd ask Tilsitt if he'd like us to convey greetings to his cousins, but he's been deuced unfriendly to me in the last few months. I can't imagine why.' ''

''So Butterfield, slyly, says, 'What cousins?' ''

''And Price replies, 'I don't know if it's cousins, exactly, but they're related in some way.' ''

'' 'Who's related?' queries Butterfield, beginning to sense which quarter the wind is in.''

'' 'What do you mean, who?' snaps Price, not very politely. 'Tilsitt and the Ernhavens. Of whom else have we been speaking for the past five minutes?' ''

''So Butterfield, with a genius for figures which has made him a success in the world of finance, puts two and two together and comes up with—''

''Willowview,'' supplied Caroline.

''A headache. In making the correct calculations, I was obliged to call to mind your description of the master of the house as a solitary, scholarly sort of gentleman engaged in historical researches. Which reminded me that Ernhaven and I do not get on. I think,'' he said with lowered voice, ''he imagines I cherish unworthy ambitions with regard to his daughter.''

Caroline was astonished. ''You, Mark? The very model of austerity and asceticism?''

''My Lord, what splendid words you have learned! Whatever do they mean?''

Caroline laughed and rubbed her face against his shoulder.

''At any rate,'' Mark went on, ''when I recalled old Ernhaven I had half a mind to cry off from Price's invitation, but then I thought of you and I simply had to come and see if my guess was right and, if so, how you were getting on. Besides, I couldn't bear to miss your confron-

tation with the aforementioned Mr. Price."

Liquid blue eyes peered earnestly into Mark's. "How is Geoff, Mark? Is he happy?"

"No," was the prompt reply. "He is miserable."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it!" declared Caroline stoutly, and Mark burst out laughing.

"It's quite true," he insisted. "He's not got over you yet. God knows why not—it's been weeks."

She tried to look offended, but failed. "It's been more than weeks. It's been months! And it's going to be longer yet, for I certainly do not intend to have him find me here. Cecily—"

"Since when do lady's maids call their mistresses by their unadorned Christian names?" interrupted Mark.

"I am more of a companion than a maid," Caroline retorted. "Cecily says so, and she asked me particularly to call her that when other servants are not by. We are friends, and she is a very lovely person."

"I know. Very fine figure. Unlike . . . some people." He ran a hand over her thin shoulders. "Are they starving you here?"

Bristling, Caroline stood up and smoothed her skirt. "That's what I was going to tell you. I have not been feeling particularly well since I heard you were coming, and Cecily has been very kind. I shall if necessary suffer a complete collapse until you go."

"Are you failing to eat as a part of this little charade?" Mark sounded as if he meant to object.

"Don't think I would not!" returned Caroline. "I would do anything not to see Geoff now. After what I've been through, I'm not ready to see my plan spoiled by a stupid coincidence!" After a moment she continued in a lighter tone. "As to your question, I have been losing weight because I have been feeling rotten out of sheer nervousness. But now that I've seen you," she patted his

cheek, "I feel much better. I have confidence we can manage. You won't tell Geoff, will you?"

Mark sighed. "I should be shot for a traitor. No, I shan't volunteer the information. But if he asks me again if I know anything, I shall be obliged to tell him I do."

"But you needn't tell him what!" cried Caroline. "You can say your lips are sealed by honor."

He sighed again. "I just hope it won't come up."

"If it does, you'll think of something," she told him, giving him a kiss. "It is so good to see you, Mark, warm and real and friendly. It reassures me that Caroline Dancer does in fact exist. Oh, my Lord, I never told you my name. I am Jenny Thorpe. I have been a lady's maid for some years."

"Did you forge your character?" he asked, curious.

"I'll tell you about it sometime," Caroline grinned.

She slipped out of the door and disappeared with a quick wave of the hand.

The happy mood that had prevailed while she was with Mark ebbed slowly away as Caroline sat, picking at a cold chicken in her room while downstairs, she knew, a gracious and agreeable dinner party was being conducted. She thought of the food, of the good wine, of the pleasant candlelight. She imagined the entertaining conversation, ably carried forward and directed by Cecily's delightful manners as a hostess. She pictured the gentlemen over their wine, while Cecily saw to the servants for a moment, and played perhaps a little tune on the piano until the men came to join her. Remembering what a pleasant voice he had, she wondered if Geoffry would be coaxed into singing. She thought of the night they had come home drunk from Vauxhall, singing ballads in the cab. She wondered rather shamefacedly if Cecily had ever been drunk in her life. She wondered what Cecily would think of her charming gentlemanly friend if she had seen him that night, full

of liquor and lust. He had torn her dress, she remembered; she had discovered it next day. She wished she had let him take her in the cab.

Worn out with the emotional upheavals of the last few days, Caroline allowed her head to sink onto her arms, and in a few minutes she was asleep in her chair. She dreamed of Brighton and Estella Silling's baby, of Pretty Penny and her handsome habit with the plumed hat; she dreamed of Hyde Park, of the Mall, and the man in the opera cape in St. James Square. It was several hours before she woke up, her neck stiff, her arms aching, and prepared to go to bed.

The house was quiet now. According to the moon, it must be something after ten o'clock. There was a sharp breeze outside. Caroline poked up her frugal little fire and stood for some minutes looking into the flames. Then she went to her bed, pulled out from underneath it a box tied with string and dreadfully dusty. It had not been opened since the day she had packed it six months ago. She had got it out of pawn with an advance on her wages and had it sent from London. Everything else had gone unredeemed. As she untied the strings and pulled off the lid of the box, she remembered her first day in Brighton. How funny they had been, those ladies, when she had told them she wanted a dressing gown for her honeymoon!

So, she asked herself as she put it on, does it make me look like a banker's whore?

She surveyed herself critically in the little glass. Her hair, grown long and now left straight, fell heavily down her back. The dressing gown hung loose and she belted it tighter. She fluffed the lace and tried to visualize it without the packing creases. Did the color make her look just the tiniest bit sallow?

Unable to decide, she took the mirror off the wall and propped it on the chair so that she could see more of

herself. Then she moved away across the room. Turning back suddenly with a smile of welcome for an imaginary visitor, she saw herself reflected for just a moment as a beautiful woman—radiant, vital, glorious—before the reflection became herself again, a pretty girl but underweight and tired-looking in a dressing gown every bit as handsome as the day she had bought it. The décolleté was not too blatant, the stuff not too glossy, the color subtle and lovely.

I look fine, she told herself. I do look like a lady. She smiled the same free, bright smile again, and was startled to see how it transformed her face.

The smile faded as she imagined what would happen if she were to leave this little room and go downstairs. She would walk with Cecily's easy grace through the hall to Geoffry's room. Without a moment's hesitation or doubt she would open the door and walk in. Would he be asleep or awake? Awake, she decided. In his dressing gown, sitting by the fire, smoking his pipe. But Geoffry didn't smoke a pipe, Caroline reminded herself. Well, never mind; with a book, then, or with one of his everlasting financial reports. But he would not be reading; he would be staring distractedly into the fire, thinking of Caroline. She would appear in the door like a djinn and say, "Good evening, Geoff," as though it were the most normal thing in the world. He would start and cry out her name. He would rush across the room to take her in his arms, kissing her a thousand times, repeating her name over and over again. Perhaps he would even shed a tear or two. Yes, Caroline thought, that was a nice touch: a tear or two of joy and of remorse. Actually, she told herself with a wry smile, he would probably take one look at her and drop dead of shock.

She stared at herself in the mirror for another few moments. It was such a small mirror that she had to stand

far away to see any more than just her face and shoulders. She looked very little and distant. Jenny, she said to herself, meet Caroline.

Then she ran to the mirror, turned it on its face, and stripped off her dressing gown. She packed it back into its box in a hurry, tied the strings, and tossed it back under the bed with a vengeance. She went to the nightstand and splashed water on her face. She plaited her hair up tightly, put on her nightcap. Only then did she replace the mirror on the table and look at herself in it.

You are so skinny, she told herself, you look like a plucked chicken.

Then she went to bed.

If Cecily, like Caroline, lay awake for some time after she went to bed that night, her sleeplessness left no unbecoming traces of fatigue in the morning. Her softly pretty face was aglow with health and good humor when she appeared in the breakfast room shortly after eight o'clock. The good-humored look abated somewhat when she saw that the sole occupant of the room was Mark.

He looked up and remarked,

" 'On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,
Musing in solitude, I oft perceive
Fair trains of imagery before me rise—'

But this one, thank heaven, is real. Do sit down, ma'am; I wish you will bear me company, for I hate to eat alone."

He pulled out a chair next to himself and Cecily sat down, albeit reluctantly, to join him for coffee and muffins.

"Where is everybody?" she asked.

"Our very energetic friend Price has taken your father off riding. Says he spends too much time indoors, wants exercise. At such an hour! Can you imagine?"

"I can imagine very well," replied Cecily tartly, "and I wish they had stayed for me, for I should have liked to go, too." She added conversationally to make up for her shortness, "I generally ride before breakfast with my Jenny, but she is suffering of an influenza."

"I should be honored, ma'am, if you will allow me to be your escort in place of your unfortunate companion," volunteered Mark with alacrity. "I recall that you have some fascinating druidic monuments close by here. Avebury is not much more than a mile or so, is it?"

Cecily's eyes danced irrepressibly. "Mr. Butterfield, you are mighty scholarly this morning! What with Wordsworth and druids over breakfast, I dare not ride out with you, for I am convinced that by noontime your conversation will be far too deep for me!"

"My dear lady," replied Mark, laughing, "I am trying to put myself into the proper frame of mind for conversing with your learned father by dinnertime."

"Does it take you all the day long to do so?"

"Perhaps I can put it off till tea," he agreed, and the breakfast conversation took on an air of pleasant relaxation.

What with anecdotes of London and tales of country life, the time spun itself out into well over an hour before Cecily got up to see to her housekeeping duties. No amount of persuasion would induce her to agree to a jaunt to Avebury Circle or over to Silbury Hill until Geoffry reappeared and joined his voice to Mark's. Then Cecily capitulated with suspicious rapidity.

"If both my guests are set on it, then I think it must be an admirable plan," she asserted.

Mark scowled at Geoffry, who gazed with a bland countenance into the distance and stoutly maintained that he was not the least bit fatigued from going out with Ernhaven.

"This way," he added, "I shan't even be obliged to

change my clothes. Think how convenient!''

Mark scowled some more. Cecily came perilously close to being forced to quit the room in a fit of the giggles.

''Jenny, my love, are you quite sure you cannot feel well enough to come?'' she asked Caroline solicitously some minutes later.

Caroline sighed with real regret, thinking that after being cooped up in the house for so many days there was nothing she would enjoy more than a crisp, invigorating trek on horseback. ''I am afraid the weather is too brisk for me,'' she said.

She found, as she peeked out a window at the departing threesome, that both gentlemen were on Willowview mounts, presumably to spare those they had ridden from London. She slipped out to the stables, thinking that Geoffry had very likely come on Nightingale. To her unutterable delight, she found in the stall next to the familiar brown gelding her own Penny, who whickered and bobbed her head in excitement as she recognized her former mistress. Caroline, ecstatic, went into the stall and stayed for half an hour, only barely resisting the urge to take her mare out for a quick turn about the park. But though she was confident she could cozen Ben into letting her, she knew it would cause a stir, so she thought better of it. By the time the Avebury party returned, Caroline was once more in her third-story room with her face buried in *Tom Jones*. She was briefly called to her duties as Cecily changed out of her riding clothes, then was left to her own devices for the rest of the afternoon.

Cecily returned to the parlor after a short rest to find that Geoffry had once again been borne off by her father to the musty confines of his study, and Mark was clamoring for a promised tour of the winter-herb garden. Buoyed up by a sense of self-confidence largely brought about by several compliments on her improved horsemanship, Cecily decided she could handle anything this afternoon. She put

on a warm shawl and took Mark's arm with a twinkle in her eye.

"We have an outstanding collection of winter herbs, Mr. Butterfield," she said cheerfully. "We are renowned in the village for our poultices for the relief of such cold-weather complaints as rheumatism, lumbago, head and chest colds, laryngitis—"

"Now, my dear Miss Ernhaven, you know I do not care tuppence for lumbago and laryngitis," Mark began.

"All the more reason you should listen to what I am telling you," she returned severely. "One never knows what Providence may hold in store. This camomile, you see, is a critical ingredient in the treatment for lumbago which, contrary to the common belief, is not a condition confined to the aged. The camomile leaves and stalks are brayed with several other herbs and mixed into a plaster, which is applied hot to the afflicted area—"

"God forbid I should ever be in need of a cure for lumbago!" cried Mark, pulling her arm tighter into his. "Don't tease me, my dear. You know I have been valiantly endeavoring all day to be alone with you. Let us talk of more congenial things than herbs and afflictions, I implore you. Let us talk of yourself."

He led her up and down the tidy, practical parterre, between the rows of short grey and green plants. For a moment there was no sound but the light crunch of gravel under their feet and the sigh of the lady's skirts.

"You are cruel, you know," said Mark, "to bury yourself down here in the country. Time and again I have thought of your visit to London last spring and longed for the sight of your beautiful eyes, regretting the distance that separated us."

"Mr. Butterfield, I do not wish to hear such things from you. If you insist upon taking this line of conversation, I must beg you will release my arm and let me return to the house at once."

Mark unhesitatingly propelled her into the shrubbery where, prudently letting go of her, he turned with a wounded expression.

"How can you be so severe with me, my Diana? How can you be so unkind as to forbid the mere expression of my constant, my undying admiration for your—"

"I know all about your undying admiration," she broke in scathingly. "It flourishes so long as you have my face in front of your nose, but as soon as we are separated it goes into a deceptively deathlike swoon."

"Miss Cecily, I assure you, there has been barely a moment in the last months—"

Cecily looked pained.

"Mr. Butterfield, don't take me for a complete sapskull. I like you very well, and I'm glad you've come for a short visit. If only you will refrain from making me bogus professions of love, we shall get on splendidly."

"Oh, Cecily, how can you doubt my sincerity? You have been always with me. Your lovely little flower of a face, my dear, has haunted my dreams."

He reached out and tilted up her chin. Paralyzed, she let him kiss her. His lips lingered on hers.

"You see, my sweet lady, how delightful one kiss can be. How much more delightful are several," he added, pulling her softly into his arms.

Cecily pulled herself, not very softly, back out again. "Mark Butterfield, you are a rascal!" she cried. "You pursue everything in skirts, from the kitchen maids to the housekeeper—"

"Ma'am, you slander me," he broke in. "Your housekeeper is sixty years old."

"I know that! You don't care! You pay her florid compliments, and she falls all over you. I daresay every woman you know falls all over you. And you," she added, her cheeks very pink, "do not scruple to fall all over them! Well, I'll tell you to your face, Mark, I know

you for what you are, and you are a . . . a sad rattle, a rake, and a roué—and I'll none of you!"

"Such exquisite alliteration," he murmured, looking impressed.

"It's no good trying to make me laugh! I shan't be jollied along! I'm onto you, you humbug, so why don't you just leave me alone? Go seduce the chambermaid or somebody!"

With this injunction, Cecily flung round and, gathering her skirts up around her shapely ankles, she ran off across the garden. Mark gave chase, of course, reflecting that if she had really meant it, she would have gone inside. It did not occur to him that she was reluctant to burst into the house in a flame of agitation that would surely not pass unnoticed. She had no desire to be quizzed and cosseted. She wanted to be alone. She ran as fast as she could, but it was no use. When she paused to rest, panting, against a tree, Mark caught up to her.

"My dear Cecily," he began, breathing heavily himself.

"Hold your tongue, Mark! Why do you keep on? I don't want you, I won't have you, and only a bully and a coward would continue to pester and torment me as you do."

Cecily's flashing eyes brimmed with tears. Mark kept his distance.

"But Cecily, my darling, you mistake my intention," he said with all the velvet sincerity in the world. "It is your heart I want for my own, not your virtue."

"Oh, fine, that was fine," she replied with biting sarcasm, as the tears spilled over and cascaded down her cheeks. "Right out of a play—a very trite play, you wicked rascal!"

Finally thrown off balance, he mumbled, "If it's a wicked rascal to wish to marry you, Cecily, then damned if I know how to be a decent fellow."

Cecily was stricken dumb. She stared at him for a long time, as he contemplated the toes of his boots. Then she shook her head incredulously. "If I thought for one moment you were in earnest, Mark, I'd call for a doctor."

"Well, I am in earnest, dammit." Mark was surprised to realize that he was speaking the truth. He looked up, laughing. "Now will you kiss me, you recalcitrant wench?"

"I have not given my reply to your flattering offer," she pointed out.

"Kiss me first, and I'll make sure of your reply," he returned, catching her round the waist and pulling her irresistibly down on the carpet of pine needles.

His first kiss was as sweet and tender as a lady could ask for, but his amorousness rapidly increased to the point where Cecily, inexperienced as she was, was almost overcome. Forcing herself to think rationally, she became conscious of the significance of compelling hands inching up her skirts and a hot, breathless whisper in her ear.

"You've been calling me nasty names all morning, unkind woman. My love; my soft, sweet beauty. You must make amends for wounding me. How cruel you were! But you love me. See how you love me, just as I love you, my darling."

He was unbuttoning buttons with dexterity.

"You, you . . . *damn* you!" shrieked Cecily, jumping up and shaking out her skirts as if to rid herself of a large, loathsome spider. "You blackguard! You Judas! You *beastly* hypocrite!"

"Oh, sweet Jesus," said Mark.

He lay spreadeagled on his stomach, covering his head with his hands, as Cecily called him every vile thing she could think of and stamped her foot with rage.

"Go on," he groaned. "Curse me, revile me. Do whatever you like. But I do want to marry you, whatever

you think. My fault is not that I love you too little, but rather that I love you too much."

Cecily stopped shouting. "You mean it?" she asked, stooping down by his head. "Do you really mean it, Mark? It's not just a ploy?"

"My dearest sweet life, how can you suspect me of such a thing? What have I ever done to give you such a notion?"

"Mark, just tell me yes or no. Do you really want me to marry you?"

"Yes," said Mark.

Cecily sat down on the ground. She patted at her hair, which promptly tumbled down again. She pulled her knees up under her chin, carefully smoothing her skirts over her legs and tucking them in under her feet. Very deliberately, she wrapped her arms round her knees. Then she rested her chin on one elbow and looked at Mark with tranquil eyes.

"Well?" he said at last. "Are you going to leave me in suspense?"

"Yes." Her face was devoid of expression. "If you want an answer, you must do the thing properly. You must seek an interview with my papa and acquire his permission to pay your addresses to me."

"Your father! The Old Tartar'll send me to the deuce, sweetheart. He dislikes me. I always try to keep out of his way. If we went to him together, that would be one thing. But a formal request for your hand? He'll pitch me out on my . . . pitch me out," he amended, catching himself.

Cecily widened her eyes disdainfully. "He will not. My papa is a gentleman." She shrugged and stood up. "Like it or not, you must speak to my papa before I will tell you what I think of your offer of marriage. Darling," she concluded tonelessly, giving him a little push with her foot.

Mark caught the foot and held it. "Sit down and give me a kiss, Cecily, one more kiss to fortify me for the ordeal."

She shook her head vigorously. "Not a chance, Mr. Butterfield. And if you do not immediately release my foot, I shall scream rape and murder."

"Don't give me ideas," retorted Mark.

Cecily started back across the lawn toward the house.

"Will you marry me even if he sends me to the right-about?"

All he got for an answer was a lilting laugh.

Mark sat on the pine needles under the tree for some time, thinking over this astonishing turn of events. He watched the dark clouds that billowed sluggishly across a sky of brittle blue. He gazed up at the rich green-black of the trees, with clean brown cones nestling among the needles. He wondered if there were any animals nearby; he didn't see any, but there might be a squirrel or a rabbit peering down from a branch or around a tree trunk. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be married, but he couldn't.

Are you a blackguard and a beastly hypocrite, he asked himself? Did you ever before, even in the face of the most determined resistance or the most well-deserved reproaches, resort to an offer of marriage?

He made a little cone out of dry brown needles. After a moment he picked up the point of it and twirled it like a top, scattering the needles again.

So you must have been sincere after all, he concluded, standing up and brushing off his trousers. You've lost your mind, that's all. At any rate, it's done now.

By the time Mark got to the house, Cecily was not to be found. Geoffry was still closeted with Mr. Ernhaven. Reluctant to lose any momentum, Mark sought out the housekeeper.

"Could you tell the master, Mrs. Watts, that I should be

grateful for a moment of his time, whenever it will be convenient for him? No hurry. Mind you tell him very politely for me, Mrs. W., because, confidentially," he lowered his voice as though he were telling her something she didn't know, "I don't think I'm just Mr. Ernhaven's favorite person in the world. But I do wish for a private word with him. Do you think you can arrange it, Mrs. W.?"

Mark had a knack of making Mrs. Watts seem like the pivotal point of the household, which in fact she was not. She smiled at his earnest face and told him she was sure there would be no difficulty in the matter. Several minutes later, she reappeared to say that the master was dressing for dinner but would see Mr. Butterfield a quarter of an hour before dinnertime in his study if that would suit Mr. Butterfield. Mr. Butterfield said it would and hurried upstairs.

In her own room, Cecily was being helped into one of her very prettiest gowns, a lavender satin affair with a lot of ivory lace and a dashing décolleté. Her obvious excitement made Caroline wish very much to know what had been going on downstairs all afternoon, but she had to remember she was ill and must not seem too lively, so she refrained from asking questions.

"Cecily, you are beautiful," she declared, putting the finishing touches on her shining hair.

"I wish I had not such very brown, plain brown hair, Jenny. I wish I had sunny tresses like yours, or raven black. Or anything but just brown."

"But your hair is lovely," insisted Caroline. "And do see what I've done with it, how it coils round in the back and over your ears in front. It makes your face such a sweet oval. Both your gentlemen will be over head and ears before the night is out."

Cecily giggled. "Indeed, I hope so! One of them has

already said he wants to marry me, but I'm not entirely convinced it's serious."

Caroline went quite white at this announcement. Knowing Mark as she did, she drew immediate conclusions eliminating him as the gentleman in question.

"Do you mean to accept him?" she asked in a thin little voice.

Cecily gazed dreamily into the mirror. "I might. Can you see me as a London matron, Jenny, holding dinner parties for distinguished gentlemen, all talking business and leaving me to prattle of hats and hemlines with their wives?"

"You would make an excellent hostess, I'm sure," said Caroline.

"And when they have all gone home, you and I could retire to my boudoir—I should be sure to have a boudoir—and laugh at them all. But we should be sure to go right out and buy the hat we had learned was most fashionable and alter our hemlines to be in style!" Cecily laughed gaily. "How absurd I am! It may all come to nothing anyway. You mustn't breathe a word."

"Of course not," said Caroline.

"I am quite ashamed to be so exhilarated. Oh, Jenny, I wish you would come to dinner! You would be so amused by my gentlemen. They are quite the opposite of each other and yet very good friends. Are you sure? But Jenny, dear, you look worse than ever. Will you go to bed now? Emma will help me later."

"Thank you. It's true I don't feel quite the thing," Caroline admitted. She felt like the end of the earth.

Cecily patted her cheek, told her to go rest, and left the room. Caroline waited until she heard Geoffry's tread in the hall. She listened as he descended the stairs after Cecily, then she skittered down the hall to Mark's room. When she knocked, Mark called, "What ho?" and she slipped in the door.

"Evening, sweetheart," he greeted her reflection as he tied his cravat. "I'm in a dash. Help me on with my coat, there's a love. Do I look proper? Will the Tartar think I look a respectable sort of rogue?"

Caroline said he looked capital, which he did, with his immaculate white neckcloth and his curling black hair.

"Why do you pull such a long face, sweets? Are you sad because you must hide upstairs and not come down to dinner with the gentlefolk?"

Caroline nodded.

"Poor Carrie. What a muddle it is for you. When are you going to pass sentence upon yourself and come back to Town? I think you'd do very well as you are now."

"No. I . . . soon, maybe. But Mark. . . ." She stopped, remembering that she wasn't to mention Cecily's secret. "You really think I can do it?"

"I don't see why not. You're a splendid woman; you'll take the town by storm!"

Caroline smiled a proud little smile. "And Mr. Pious Price too!"

Mark laughed and agreed, "Mr. Price is as good as dead already."

"Even if he got married or something, I could still have my revenge, don't you think?"

"Married? I don't think there's much likelihood of that. But damn, I'll be late. Good night, love. See you in the morning in the garden, right?"

"Right."

As he went down the stairs, Mark noticed with annoyance that his watch must be fast, for it yet wanted ten minutes to the time of his appointment with Ernhaven. He was disappointed to find there was no one in the drawing room to entertain him. He got himself a glass of brandy and sat down, thinking he was sure he had heard both Cecily and Geoffry go down before him and wondering why they were not there.

Upstairs, Caroline decided she couldn't bear it; she just couldn't bear it. Sneaking down the steps on tiptoe, she caught a glimpse of Mark, sitting alone in the drawing room and gazing abstractedly into his glass. So where, she wondered, were Cecily and Geoff? They must be in the little east parlor or in the small library. The east parlor was closer, so Caroline tried it first. She crept up to the door, feeling like a criminal, knowing it would cost her a terrific scolding and possibly even her position if she were caught eavesdropping. Nonetheless, after a quick look round, she pressed her ear to the door.

She heard a low voice say clearly, "Wait a moment before you answer. No proposal of marriage is complete without a kiss."

Heedless of the consequences, Caroline had her eye at the keyhole in a trice. The scene that met her gaze was a charming one. Cecily was seated in a green chair, looking like a lovely lilac flower. Geoffry stood before her, wearing his most debonair smile. Caroline could see him so clearly that it seemed he must be able to see her, and she had to consciously repress a guilty start. She saw Cecily in profile say, "Geoffry, really," in some confusion. But in spite of her objection, he bent and kissed her gently on the mouth.

In order to hear, Caroline had to take her eye from the keyhole and put her ear to it.

Geoffry said, "Will you give me your answer now?"

"Yes," said Cecily. "Yes, of course."

The words hit Caroline like a blow. She stood up, leaning weakly against the door jamb, and she felt her eyes fill with inexplicable tears. She remembered her invitation to Brighton: "If you come, you come; if you don't, I'll go by myself." It had made no odds to him; he hadn't even asked for a definite answer. But from Cecily, he wanted an answer right away; he couldn't bear to wait.

I hate him, thought Caroline, vanishing up the servants'

stairs. Oh, how I hate him! I shall make him so miserable he'll be sorry he ever saw my face. I'll make him wish he was never born!

Inside the little east parlor, Cecily had gone on, choosing her words with care. "I know my own heart, my dear and I know yours, I think. Does that give you your answer?"

He smiled. "I'm afraid it does."

Cecily looked at him gravely with her cool grey eyes. After a moment they began to sparkle, then she laughed out loud and took his hand. "Jolly, you're mad! Marry me—whatever gave you such a notion? You don't love me at all!"

"Oh, yes, I do," he said. "Even if you will persist in calling me by that absurd name."

"I will persist. It reminds you that we have been friends since you were ten years old. And of course we love each other, but not that sort of love. People mustn't marry unless they're *in* love. You know, cross the highest mountain, swim the deepest sea! Ah, ha, a spark of comprehension in your eye and a shadow across the brow. Own up! You know perfectly well what it is to feel a devouring passion, and it isn't for me!"

Geoffry gave her a look of mock severity. "*I* may. But you, young lady, have no business knowing anything about devouring passion."

Cecily smiled enigmatically. Looking into his eyes, she said, "Tell me about it," and felt his hand tighten involuntarily on hers.

"Oh, I admit there's been a girl or two," he said lightly, "but hardly the sort of girls one talks about with well-bred young women."

Cecily made an impatient moue. "Must a well-bred young woman be a perpetual schoolgirl, Jolly? Don't be so tiresome! Tell me about your girl. Not 'a girl or two'—*the* girl."

He thought for a moment, then shrugged. "What's to tell? It's the same old story. I met a girl. I wanted her, and she needed someone to provide for her. We kept company for some weeks, then we quarreled. We slapped each other about a bit, said some unforgivable things, and she left me."

In spite of her casual pose, Cecily's eyes widened. She tried to imagine Geoffry and a mistress slapping each other about. It was beyond her. "What was she like?"

"Like? Very pretty, very saucy, sometimes very common. Golden hair, blue eyes, skin like new cream. Thin sort of girl, but lively. I couldn't keep . . . my hands off her," he finished, looking away, embarrassed at what he had said. When he looked back at Cecily, his face was impassive. "In short, she was a Cyprian, and a talented one."

"What became of her?"

"I don't know. She left London."

"Did you try to find her again?"

"No, I . . . yes. Yes, I did. She vanished. Cecily, I'm afraid I find this pointless sort of postmortem a little painful. Can we not forget Caroline and speak of something more pleasant?"

Caroline. Cecily tried to conjure up an image of Geoffry making love to a golden-haired girl named Caroline. She wondered what he looked like without his clothes.

Flushing suddenly, she said, "Yes, indeed, we can talk of something more pleasant. Now that I've told you without flinching the real reason we couldn't marry, you and I, I'll tell you something more in the nature of a social reason." She smiled. "I have another suitor."

"Ah, ha."

"I do! But I haven't given him my answer yet, and of course I couldn't consider another suitor until I've settled

with the first one. Dear me, what a life!" She sighed affectedly, wearing a coquettish expression so uncharacteristic it made Geoffry laugh.

"I see. You are breaking hearts right and left. You've left this other poor soul on tenterhooks?"

Cecily looked rather pleased with herself. "I have. I have indeed."

She would have been even more pleased with herself if she could have seen Mark nervously pouring himself a second brandy and sloshing it around in the glass so he wouldn't drink it all at a gulp. By the time Geoffry strolled into the drawing room, Mark was in a state.

"What are you doing here in the dark?" Geoffry asked. "Why didn't you call to have the lamps lit?"

"Didn't think of it."

Geoffry shrugged and went around lighting the lamps himself.

"Spent the afternoon with Ernhaven, did you?" Mark put in. "Was he in a good humor?"

Geoffry gave him a look of surprise.

"Well, yes, I should say so. What do you care? You never see him but at dinner, and then you don't say three words to him. Very interesting man, though. We were discussing the primitive economics of the country—his medieval stuff, you know—in relation to the proposed railways. Provocative."

"Only you," rejoined Mark in a hollow tone, "could call railways and medieval economics provocative."

"My dear fellow, you don't sound yourself at all. It's all right, Mary Jane, I've done it," he told the parlor maid who came in to light the lamps.

She went out again.

"Are you blue-deviled, Butterfield? In a pet because you were left alone? Bored?"

"Nervous. Bloody nervous is what I am. Never been

before and never hope to re-experience the phenomenon. Damned unpleasant."

"Nervous?"

"I've offered for Cecily, and she insists I speak to the Tartar before she'll give me her reply. Not at all in my line, speaking to fathers."

Mark drummed with his fingers on the face of his watch. Geoffry stared.

"Strange. I thought I heard you say something implying an honorable proposal. What did you really mean, Mark?"

"I meant it, I meant it. Of course, I didn't know I meant it when I said it, but I find upon reflection that it isn't a bad idea at all. Very fine girl, Cecily. Besides, it will add a spot of respectability to my public image. And well, dammit, I never resorted to such a suggestion before!"

Despite the lack of coherence in this speech, Geoffry was perfectly enlightened. He burst into laughter and poured himself a glass.

"Why is it so damned funny?" growled Mark.

"You! It never so much as crossed my mind she could mean you!"

"What's the matter with me? For God's sake stop chortling like a demented baboon!"

Geoffry apologized, but couldn't stop chuckling occasionally.

"I offered for her, too," he explained, "not fifteen minutes ago. She turned me down flat though. At least she gave you a fighting chance. Do you suppose she really has got a tendre for you, or do you think she's just putting you through your paces to take you down to size?"

"Damned if I know. But you don't seem too terribly cut up by your rejection, I see."

Geoffry was no longer laughing. He looked quite solemn. "No, I'm not. She was quite right. She said it was nonsense to marry just on the strength of friendship. I

don't know about that, but it's certain that if she feels that way, she shouldn't marry me, for she and I have never been in love, whatever that is."

At this point Mrs. Watts came to the door and said that Mr. Ernhaven was in his study. Mark said he was on his way.

"I feel like I'm in a damned government office in queue," he commented testily, finishing off his drink. "Did you speak to the old fellow?"

"No. I went to Cessy first. Good luck."

Mark grinned suddenly. "You want to get married, but you don't want Cecily. I want Cessy, but I don't want to get married. You'd think we could work out some sort of compromise. I'll suggest it to her dad."

"You do that," approved Geoffry. "I'll come scrape you off the pavement and give you a Christian burial."

As Mark went out, laughing, Geoffry walked to the window. He pulled back the red velvet draperies. "I don't really want to get married," he murmured.

He looked out at the night and wondered if it would snow.

XII

In the morning Cecily stayed late abed, and Caroline spent the hours between six, when she woke up, and eight in a fever of impatience. Emma, the chambermaid, said Miss Cecily went to bed last night in a rare taking, and Emma was sure it was something, don't you know, of a romantic nature, all these handsome gentlemen hanging about the house. She giggled in such an irritating manner as she said this that Caroline had all she could do to keep from slapping her.

The reason, Caroline told herself, that she was not keen on Geoffry marrying Cecily was that she would be sorry to make Cecily unhappy, and of course if she were his wife she would be unhappy if he was unhappy and by God Caroline was going to see to it that he would be unhappy. With this admirable sentiment, she repaired to the kitchen with her book and a cup of tea, saying that she would wait for Miss Cecily's bell over by the window where the light was good. Mrs. Watts, who had begun to believe that Jenny was consumptive, let her be. She even put some honey and a drop of the kitchen brandy into her tea as a restorative. Caroline drank the posset, pretending to read. In reality, she spent most of the time looking out the window for Mark and turning pages at random.

When he finally appeared, strolling nonchalantly past the herb beds toward the far end of the house, Caroline started uncontrollably. She looked round to see if anyone had noticed him, and then, confident that he had been out of range of the rest of the occupants of the kitchen, she jumped up and announced that she was going out for a quick breath of air. She said she would remain in earshot. Mrs. Watts had left the kitchen, and no one else much cared what Jenny did. The kitchen maid, who was jealous, vowed that if Miss Cecily rang while Jenny was out, the voice that called for her would not be a particularly loud or urgent one. But of course it wouldn't make much difference. Jenny could do no wrong, so far as Miss Cecily was concerned. The kitchen maid sniffed and put away a pot with a bang.

Mark was lounging against the stone wall of a far wing of the building when Caroline came up to him.

"What happened last night?" she demanded without preliminary.

Mark laughed. "The damnedest business. What's the last thing in the world you'd expect me to do?"

"Expect you to do?" asked Caroline. "*You* to do?"

"Well, perhaps it's only the next-to-last thing. The last thing you'd expect would be for me to go through with it. But I shall probably do that as well."

Caroline stared at him.

"Cecily and I are engaged," he explained.

Caroline looked bewildered.

"Marriage, you know. Makes it legal." He grinned at Caroline's incredulous face. "I know, it's quite mad, but rather agreeable all the same. Her father was positively cordial. Not ecstatic over my financial situation, but not utterly dismayed. He said it was up to Cessy, and Cessy said yes. Remarkable thing for a sensible young woman to do."

"*You*?" gasped Caroline, finding her tongue at last. "*You*? Oh, Mark!"

With a little moan, she collapsed in his arms in tears. This was not quite the reaction he had been expecting. In consternation, for Mark always felt ill at ease with tears, he held her tight, patting her on the back.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, you don't think it will make any difference between us, do you? We shall still be the best of friends."

"Booby!" Caroline laughed through her tears. "Of course we shall still be friends! I thought it was Geoff she was going to marry. Indeed, Mark, I heard him ask her."

"She turned him down. Flat, he said."

"But. . . ." Caroline thought it over. "I must have misunderstood. Well, bravo, Cecily! How perfectly mortifying to be turned down in favor of one's best friend. How clever of you, Mark, to ask her at just this very time!"

She kissed him with great enthusiasm on the mouth. Still holding her close, Mark kissed her back with equal enthusiasm.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy," she told him, smiling into his eyes.

"I wish I might be as sure," came a cool ironic voice.

They both started violently and jumped guiltily apart. Cecily had materialized, apparently out of thin air.

And here we have, Mark thought, what will doubtless be one of the shortest engagements on record. He was surprised at how sorry he felt.

Caroline, however, had no intention of letting Cecily draw her own conclusions. She grabbed her hand to prevent her from turning away, which Cecily was far from planning to do, and launched into a haphazard explanation.

"It's not what you think! Not anything like that. Mark—Mr. Butterfield—and I are old friends. We knew each other in London. He's been very kind to me. We are jolly good friends, nothing more, not ever. He was telling me he was engaged to you and I threw myself at him, positively threw myself. He had nothing to do with it! I was . . . impulsive because I was pleased. I'm sure you won't be angry with him for something that was in no way his fault!"

Out of breath, she took Mark's hand and put Cecily's into it.

"And he was resisting so hard, too!" observed Cecily ironically. "Well, Caroline, we'll just have to think it all over, shan't we?"

"Oh, Cecily, you're so sensible! In your place I'm sure I—"

Caroline broke off with a horrified gasp as she realized that Cecily had called her not Jenny, but Caroline. She shot a suspicious glance at Mark, but Mark was looking as startled as she was.

"I think," said Cecily, taking an arm of each, "that we should go inside where there is a fire and hold a council."

"An excellent plan," agreed Mark, steering them toward the nearest door.

Caroline just came along without a word. It was not

until they were safely inside the back parlor, with the door firmly closed, that she could force herself to breathe again. It would have been an appropriate time, she thought, to stumble upon Geoffry, but it seemed somehow auspicious that they had not, and she began to wonder if it might not all turn out for the best. Either she would be dismissed immediately, or she would have in Cecily another ally. No one, Caroline felt, could be so unkind as to expose her to Geoffry now.

Mark lit the fire, which had been newly laid an hour ago, and Cecily pulled up chairs for them to sit in. Caroline stood by, looking and feeling quite helpless.

"Come now, Jenny, sit down and get warm. Don't think at all. Mark and I shall decide what's to be done," said Cecily compassionately, which made Caroline start to cry. But she squared her shoulders and sat down in her chair.

"My suggestion," put in Mark, "is that we bundle her upstairs, chuck her into Price's room, and lock them both in until they've settled their differences."

"Oh, Mark!" cried both his listeners. Caroline's tone was horrified, Cecily's merely impatient.

"Don't tease her, Mark, she's upset. Now, Jenny, or Caroline, rather, I suppose I could ask you a lot of questions, but I don't really care about all that. I do know you knew both Jolly and Mark in London, and now you're hiding from J—Geoffry."

In spite of herself, Caroline could not help giving a choking sort of giggle at Geoffry's childhood nickname.

"What I don't understand," Cecily went on, "is how you happened to choose this particular house to hide from him in."

Caroline explained that it was the sheerest coincidence. She felt a moment's antagonism toward Captain Tilsitt, but Cecily said that although Tilsitt was a relation he was not very intimate with the family and probably had forgot-

ten all about the connection with Geoffry's family if, indeed, he had even known of it.

"What *I* don't understand," said Mark, "is how the devil you found Caroline out."

Cecily couldn't help looking a little smug. "I am merely observant, my dear Mr. Butterfield. I noticed that Jenny's indisposition seemed to reach a crisis point just as you and Geoffry arrived. It occurred to me that she might be avoiding one of you, though I was quite sure it was you, Mark. I remembered she had dropped the tea tray when I first mentioned your name. And last night when I mentioned I had received an offer from one of my guests, she looked quite stricken. At the time I just thought she wasn't feeling up to snuff, but then I thought of it later. It wasn't till this morning that I realized she must be Jolly's Caroline, when I heard her telling you she thought it he I was going to marry." She turned to Caroline with a quizzical little smile. "He told me about you yesterday. Described your hair, eyes, that sort of thing. He said you were 'a Cyprian, and a talented one.' "

Caroline blushed, whether from embarrassment or vexation was impossible to tell.

"I was, too," she said vehemently after a short pause. "And do you want to know why I left him?" For all her china-doll prettiness, Caroline could be quite fierce. "I left him because I fell in love with him, like a fool, and to him I was still nothing but an entertaining little tart he had taken up off the street. Never mind that I had never been on the streets to begin with. I wasn't quite that depraved, but to him it was all the same thing. I was a negligible creature, not to be taken seriously." Her eyes aflame, Caroline turned to Mark. "Isn't it true? I was nothing to him, just *nothing*! Isn't it true, Mark?"

He put out a placating hand. "Hardly nothing, Caroline. He was quite cast down when you left him.

Hasn't been near a woman since, so far as I know."

Caroline made a noise of disbelief. "It's been six months! He couldn't stay away from me for as many days without getting ruttish as a goat in the springtime. He pretends to be so prim and proper and looks down his nose, but I know what he's really like! And I am going to make him pay for the way he treated me! He is going to see I am not nothing, and he will never dare to look down his nose at me again!" She bit her lip, taken aback by her own eloquence, and finished in a more subdued voice, "I shall make a fool of him, just as he made a fool of me."

Cecily put up her eyebrows. "How?" she asked expressionlessly.

With a darting glance at Mark, Caroline decided on candor. "I am becoming a lady, and when I go back I shall renew my acquaintance with Mr. Price on equal terms. I daresay," she added hesitantly, "you would all be of the same set, wouldn't you?"

"More or less," said Mark. "Geoffry has got a little upper now. Snobbish pretenses to the contrary, the stronger the stink of commerce about one, the more tolerable it is socially."

"Mark, you exaggerate," objected Cecily. "There are some City people who are perfectly dreadful and should rightly be avoided. Others, like you and Geoffry, are gentlemen, and everybody knows it. Only a very few, impossibly pretentious people sneer about what you just called the 'stink of commerce' in that nasty way, without differentiating between the parvenus and the gentlemen."

"Well," said Caroline, "I intend to become a gentlewoman. Mark told me I needed four things: manners, money, reputation, and a patron—"

"—ess," interrupted Mark. "A girl with your looks is bound to be suspect if she is introduced by a man. No, don't look at me like that; *I* can't help it."

Caroline gazed at Mark in some dismay, which rapidly developed into real distress as she saw that he was quite serious.

"Well, of course, darling. I told you that at the outset. I didn't? Well, I told you it was a hen-witted scheme. London is full of beautifully mannered young ladies of spotless reputation who sit at home with their increasingly bilious mamas day after endless, uneventful day. One must know somebody."

"I know somebody," said Caroline.

In the face of the ensuing reproachful stare, Mark quailed visibly. At first uncomprehending, he finally gasped, "*Me*? My darling girl, an introduction from me would damn you from the very start! I have the most inconceivably shocking reputation. You know the sort of—" Suddenly recalling the presence of his newly betrothed, Mark broke off. "—the sort of life I lead," he finished in another tone entirely. "Above reproach, of course, but gossip will take root and spread without the slightest justification."

Cecily burst out laughing. "Humbug!"

Mark shrugged, and his charming smile lit up his face. "One must at least try to preserve appearances."

Cecily realized after a moment that they were gazing at each other in an absurdly sentimental way. She turned to Caroline, who had found something fascinating in the design on the frame of the firescreen. "So you are determined to meet Geoffry on his own ground?"

"I am." Caroline sat contemplative for a long moment. The fire crackled in the grate. "I am! I have got pretty acceptable manners now. All I need from you, Mark, is the first introduction, the very first. I can get by on clever lies after that. You know I can! I can hire a duenna, invent a family. I can avoid my old acquaintances; they were hardly the sort I'd be likely to meet at a tea party anyway, and there were so very few. I could dye

my hair if need be. I can do it! If I could have done well in the theater, I can use the same talents in society. I don't want to be taken to court, after all, just to a party or two. Mark, you've got to introduce me! You have got to!''

Forgetting herself entirely, she jumped out of her chair to grasp him by the arms. All melting blue eyes and trembling rosy lips, she cried, ''I've counted on you from the first. You can't go all censorious on me now! You are my only hope! I can do the rest by myself, everything, but that first introduction . . . Mark!''

Finding that his expression of detached interest did not change, she flung herself across the room to the window seat, choking, ''You are the only friend I have in London!''

Mark transferred his eyes to Cecily, whose face was a study in conflicting emotions. ''Brilliant, isn't she? I can quite see her as Desdemona. She could make a fortune.''

Caroline, gone completely to pieces, huddled against the window, her slight body racked by sobs which were really not staged at all. ''I don't want to make a fortune,'' she whispered. ''I just want to be respectable.''

Cecily had started up, with no clear intention but to go to her, when there came a collected little knock at the door. Caroline continued to cry until Cecily flew to her side, shushing her and pulling the curtain to hide her.

''He mustn't see you this way at all events,'' she murmured soothingly, and sent toward Mark a glare that immediately murdered any intention he might have had of giving Caroline away.

''Come in,'' called Cecily.

''Dear me,'' said Geoffry, coming in as bid, ''I seem to have interrupted a significant something or other. I hope you will forgive me.''

Cecily said it was all right. Geoffry bowed.

''I have but a word to say. Butterfield, I plan to head for Bath this morning, as the weather appears to be taking a

turn for the worse. If you care to accompany me, I'll ask Rafe to have Penny ready, too." He smiled. "However, I'm sure I need not tell you I do not really expect you."

If Geoffry found anything odd in the fact that Cecily stood half hidden in the shadows of the curtained window, he made no sign. It might be inferred that he knew from experience a girl left alone with Mark for any substantial amount of time was not always in a state to be scrutinized by a third party.

In answer to the implied question Mark said, "I'll talk it over with my hostess. Where shall I be able to find you in about a quarter of an hour?"

Geoffry, with infinite grace, said he would be in his room packing and withdrew.

For a moment after his departure, no one moved. Mark, his handsome face perfectly composed, leaned back and crossed his legs negligently before turning a mildly inquisitive gaze on his bride-to-be. She, for her part, looked first into his eyes and then down at the shapely white hands she held so quietly folded in front of her. One of the fingers, the third one on the left hand, was encircled by a man's ring with a smallish diamond bezel. Both pairs of eyes grew thoughtful.

There was a muffled sound behind the window curtains, and Caroline clambered out with a peculiar dignity, lent, perhaps, by extreme economy of movement. "Miss Cecily," she said, very pale, very drawn, her eyes on the floor, "if you don't mind, may I go to my room?"

"Of course," said Cecily.

As she passed by Mark, Caroline paused.

"You are just like him. We . . . I . . . amuse you. We are condemned by you always to remain what we were. If we try to better ourselves, you are always there to laugh and push us back down." A grey shadow of pain crossed over her face. "God, how I hate you all."

Mark's half-formed apology died on his lips as she turned her back on him and left the room.

"She's right," said Cecily. "You were hateful to make light of her and tell her she cannot possibly mix with decent people." Opening the heavy damask curtains and shaking them into place, she assumed a businesslike, housewifely air. "I don't think," she added, "you have the remotest idea what it's like for her."

"Know what what's like? To be a whore? A lady's maid? A social climber?" inquired Mark acidly. "No, I can't say that I do."

"What it's like to be in love, Mark." Cecily's voice was calm but full of intensity.

Mark recrossed his legs, an angry frown creasing his forehead. "What is this, open season on Butterfield?"

"What it's like to be agonizingly, wretchedly in love," she elaborated, "and quite sure it is hopeless."

Startled, Mark was no longer frowning. "You do?"

"I do," said Cecily.

Another frown, this one of perplexity, knit the perfect black eyebrows as Mark digested this bit of information. He made a curiously endearing, hesitant gesture of query toward himself; Cecily nodded. He leaned back in his chair and stared pensively into the fire. He sat easily, relaxed and graceful, the picture of rakish elegance. It was easy to see why a woman would find him irresistible. But equally compelling in its own way was the quiet figure opposite, serene, tender, with all the sweetness of feminine virtue and none of its intractability.

"Now, dammit, Cessy, you can't expect me to aid and abet the chit in taking revenge upon my best friend," Mark expostulated at last.

Cecily seemed to consider this a satisfactory comment, for she smiled sympathetically and came to stand beside him. He took her firmly on his knee.

"Silly man," she said. "It's not revenge she wants; it's him. Poor child. She's very clever, Mark, fit for much more than lady's maiding. What will become of her if she doesn't go back to him one way or another?"

Mark shrugged uncomfortably. "Someone will take her on, Cessy. She could be quite a figure in the demimonde. Depend upon it, she knows how to make a man happy. How else could she have set our sober friend Geoffry on fire?"

"You haven't any . . . firsthand experience?"

Ruefully, he admitted Caroline had been proof against his most persuasive wiles. This seemed to make a favorable impression on Cecily. She laid her head against his shoulder and thought for a moment.

"Mark, what was she like when she was with Geoffry? Was she the same as most girls of that sort?"

"Well, I should say . . . no, she wasn't. She didn't clamor after baubles or try to put on much of a show. They just lived together rather quietly. They were quite happy, I think, until they got in over their heads."

"And yet they weren't happy when they parted either. She was desperately unhappy when she first came here. And Jolly—when he spoke of her, his eyes clouded over in a lost sort of way, like an animal in pain that just doesn't understand. What sort of background does she come from?"

Mark couldn't say. To judge from her speech when he first met her, some sort of small tradesman's milieu. All he really knew about her was that she'd kept company with an old colonel, name of Warburton, before Geoffry took up with her. Oldish fellow, but still on active duty. Just been shipped off to India, Mark thought.

"India," Cecily echoed. "Do you believe such women ever really reform?"

"Oh, yes. Some do. It depends on why they were what they were and why they choose to give it up. If they were

kept women because they liked it, and if it went on for a long time, they've generally come to thrive on the excitement of it, and respectability seems deadly dull."

"But she wants to be respectable."

"Yes, I believe she truly does."

"Then we must give her the chance, Mark," said Cecily.

"Great God, you're not thinking of taking her up yourself, after we're married?"

"Why not? *I* have not got an 'inconceivably shocking reputation,' even if you ve."

"Cecily, for the *moment* she wants to be respectable, but who's to say she won't change her mind? And if it ever comes out what she was—well, it'll be damned awkward, that's all I can say."

"For me or for you?"

"Well, not so much for me, I don't think, but for you certainly. Think what people would say about you!"

"But I don't care, Mark. So a few people will cluck over my erring judgment of character or my gullibility or something. What's that to me? Besides, I'm willing to take the chance. I think all my Jenny really wants out of life is Geoffry, and he wants her."

"Ah, ha, the truth will out! It isn't high-minded social reform that motivates you, but the homely feminine compulsion to make a match."

"To give them the opportunity to meet again, Mark, that's all. I shan't do it unless I truly am persuaded she won't disgrace us. But darling, I am so happy! I can't bear to feel I might help her to be as happy as I am and then not do it out of . . . cowardice or prejudice or some such base, stupid thing."

"You are a beautiful woman, Mrs. Butterfield," said her betrothed. "Crack-brained, but very beautiful."

It was a good half-hour before Cecily was out and about in the house again. She had several chores to attend to and

a number of questions and complaints to answer before she had a minute's spare time. It had to be decided whether the weather was suitable for drying clothes outdoors, whether a fresh tablecloth should be laid, whether it was the cook or the kitchen maid who was responsible for a broken sauce boat, whether Raphael might visit his ailing uncle, whether Mr. Geoffry would stay for luncheon or take a basket with him. As soon as she could tear herself away from Mrs. Watts, Cecily slipped upstairs. She bypassed Geoffry's room, vowing to come right down and tell him goodbye in five minutes, then she climbed the stairs to the third floor and, knocking gently on the door to Caroline's room, turned the knob and went in. She had imagined Caroline might be sleeping after the storm of tears she had shed downstairs an hour before, but she was not. It took Cecily a moment to associate the exquisite young woman in shimmering green with the thin girl who, her hair tightly plaited and her form encased in shapeless dark blue or grey, attended downstairs as her maid.

Caroline turned slowly from the mirror, her hairbrush in her hand, thick golden tresses covering her shoulders. Her eyes were lifeless. All the fire had gone out of her. She had given up.

"This is the only thing I didn't sell," she said dreamily.

She stood up and walked to the other side of the room, a matter of five or six paces.

"I thought I'd put it on just once more and then burn it. I daresay when it's gone I shall begin to believe the real me is this." She fingered the sensible serge of her working dress which lay neatly across the chair. "Will you give me a character? I honestly don't think I could tell all those lies again with a straight face."

"What will you do if I say I will, but I must tell the truth?"

Caroline's expression didn't change. She lifted one delicate white shoulder and let it fall. "I don't need that

sort of character. Maybe I'll go back to my aunt in Birmingham. Perhaps she'd let me stay on if I took in sewing or something to earn my keep. As a seamstress," she added with a look Cecily did not at all understand. "I should like to see my sister again. She is fifteen now. I haven't seen her in two years."

"Don't you think that might really be the best thing for you?" Cecily asked kindly. "At least you have some family to go to. I should think your aunt would be glad to find you had got out of your old way of life."

"My aunt?" Caroline smiled, a cool, bitter smile. "How do you think I got into my old way of life?"

That was enough for Cecily. The very idea of an aunt that encouraged a girl into prostitution aroused every protective instinct in her, along with a burning indignation against society at large. Cecily was on the whole fairly well satisfied with the class structure in which she lived and would probably have defended it to any detractors on the ground that for most people it was the most comfortable way to get on in human society, everyone knowing his place and conforming to it. But when presented with a case where the social structure was operating to the detriment of someone she knew and loved and, moreover, admired, then Cecily had no doubts about which side she would take.

"You're not leaving! You're coming to London with me," she declared decisively. As Caroline opened her mouth to decline, she hasted to add, "Not as my maid. As my friend from the country, a neighbor or something. And as soon as we can manage it, we'll have your sister with us. What sort of aunt have you got, anyway?"

XIII

It had been so long since she had seen Aunt Augusta, and so much had happened since then, that Caroline hardly knew what sort of aunt it really was that she had. So far as that went, she didn't care. She did, however, care about her sister, and so, when the wedding had been solemnized and Mark and Cecily duly dispatched on their modest wedding journey into Devonshire, Caroline boarded a coach in Bath and set off northward for Birmingham.

It had been a lovely wedding, she reflected. She had rarely gone through anything so unpleasant in her life. She had been obliged to skulk miserably about behind the scenes, hiding not only from Geoffry but also, at Cecily's unaccountable insistence, from his parents as well. His father turned out to be an austere, very rectorish man of about fifty-five with dark hair and Geoffry's punctilious manners. His mother was a small, plump woman, fair and cheerful, who gossiped a lot and appeared to be in every way the most typical sort of mother one could imagine. Caroline peeked at them both several times from various safe vantage points, and she thought they seemed quite depressingly genteel and agreeable. The wedding itself, officiated at by Geoffry's father, had been held in the local church, much decorated with spring flowers. Caroline had attended, as one of the servants, sitting far in the back so she could slip in late and out early. It had been beautiful. Cecily had been, as brides are supposed to be, nothing short of radiant; Mark had pronounced his vows with

heart-warming conviction. Caroline had bolted as people began to crowd round offering congratulations, and Geoffry insisted on his privilege of kissing the bride. It had been perfectly horrible. Caroline was vastly relieved to be quit of all those smiling people, from whose happiness she had been so wretchedly excluded.

Now she was on her way to Birmingham for a short visit before proceeding to London to prepare the Butterfields' new house in Bloomsbury Square for their arrival. In London, it had been decided, she would assume the unelaborated status of a friend of the family and simply, as Mark said, see what she could make of herself. Mark privately had no doubt that she would be a smashing success and leave them for the love nest of some exalted personage in short order. Cecily privately believed she would fly into Geoffry's arms the moment they confronted each other. Caroline—well, she didn't really have any preconceived ideas, except that she assuredly would not do either of those things. First, she would settle her affairs with her family.

She arrived in Birmingham one rainy afternoon toward the end of April and made her rather disheartening way to the dark little street where her aunt and Georgia had moved right after she had taken up with Stirling. She hoped they were still living there. As she mounted the shabby stairs, a flood of piano music came pouring down to greet her. If that was Georgia—and Caroline was sure it must be—she had made wonderful progress. Caroline straightened her smart new jacket of Wedgwood blue, tucked a rebellious tress up under her new black felt hat with two white feathers, and tried to quiet her pounding pulses. She felt unreasonably frightened, as if some unsuspected and irrational force would, the moment she faced her aunt, pluck her out of the present and entrap her once more in the coils of the past. Caroline forced

herself to be brisk. She rapped sharply on the door.

The music continued, though somewhat abated, and after a few minutes a cautious, querulous lifting of the latch was heard. The door opened, not very wide, to reveal a lined, flaccid face far more weak than wicked.

"Good afternoon, Aunt Augusta," said Caroline in her rich, throaty voice.

The piano playing stopped abruptly.

As Aunt Augusta puffed and stammered, remembering with difficulty to open the door and let her in, Caroline looked beyond her to where a thin brown-haired girl had appeared, with enormous blue eyes not unlike Caroline's own peering through the dim hallway.

"Hallo, Georgie," said Caroline clumsily.

Georgia cast a look both defiant and triumphant at her aunt before she managed to say with a wavering half-smile, "Hallo, Carrie." As Caroline hugged her, she whispered, "I knew you'd be back. No matter what *she* said, I always knew. And after that man came, I knew it would be soon."

Suddenly all the constraint was gone, and Caroline could smile at her sister unreservedly. "Of course, darling. I told you I should come back. You knew I would never leave you alone."

"I know," said Georgia, heroically blinking back her tears. "I knew all the time."

Aunt Augusta, still bustling uncomfortably, invited Caroline to sit down, which she did, and they engaged in some silly chit-chat about hadn't Georgia got tall in the last months, and then, dimly perceiving herself to be an encumbrance, Aunt Augusta went into the kitchen to make tea.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Georgia exploded.

"Carrie, you won't leave me this time, will you?" She gripped her sister's arm as the words spilled out. "I don't

care where we go or anything, only take me with you! When you went away with Stirling Bascombe, Aunt Augusta said we must not think of you any more because you were a bad girl and it was like you were dead to all respectable people, but I didn't believe it, not for one second! I thought of you all the time, and I know you only went with Stirling Bascombe because of the two hundred pounds and my piano, but I didn't touch it for three weeks because it was his money and I hated him because he took you away. This time I want to go with you, Carrie. I don't care if you are somebody's mistress, like that man who came, or what, Carrie! I don't care about anything like that, and if you are not respectable I don't want to be respectable either, and I don't care anything for all that money—I just want you to take me with you wherever you go, Carrie, please, Carrie, *please!*"

Caroline, who had been vainly trying to stem this impassioned tide, finally managed to cut in, saying, "Of course, Georgia. That's why I've come, to arrange to take you away with me."

"Oh, Carrie!" cried Georgia and burst into tears.

Caroline laughed gently, as well as she could when she was very near to crying herself. "Georgia, what melodrama! Has Aunt Augusta been so very bad to you?"

"No," she admitted, fishing for her handkerchief. "Not really, but she wasn't you and she said bad things about you and she said you would never come back and we should never see the color of all that money, just as if it was only for the money that we wanted you to come back, which made me *so* angry!"

"What money?" asked Caroline, mystified. "Do you imagine I am rich? I have got a little, two or three hundred pounds, but not enough to cause such a stir. Besides," she added, "Aunt Augusta need not bother herself over my money, for she will not see tuppence of it. It is all for you

and me, Georgie." She hesitated. "Georgie, who is 'that man' you keep talking of? Did . . . did a man come looking for me here?"

"Oh, yes. About a month ago. A gentleman, ever so fine. But you," she put in shyly, "are very fine, too, and you speak like a lady. You are prettier even than you were, Carrie."

"Well, thank you, my dear," said Caroline, sounding very much like Cecily. "But I am afraid you will grow to be the beauty of the family yet and put me in the shade!"

Georgia knew she would never have looks to rival Caroline's, but she blushed happily all the same to think that her sister approved of her.

"But go on, Georgia, about the gentleman."

Georgia nodded. "He came to the door one day at tea time, and he asked, ever so politely, if we were the Skuttles who used to live in Walsall, and at first Aunt Augusta tried to pretend we did not know you, because she was frightened, I think, but then he said something about Stirling Bascombe, so Aunt Augusta said yes, that was you, but we hadn't any news from you in many months. He insisted for a bit, in a polite way, but I guess he believed her because then he went off, after thanking her very nicely. And I think he gave her some money, but I don't know how much because I only got a glimpse of him and then Augusta made me go away. But I listened."

"Was he fair, this gentleman, or dark?"

It was a superfluous question. Caroline knew there was only one person who might have traced her through Stirling Bascombe.

"Fair. A tallish man, elegant, and I think he had a moustache, but I'm not sure because I didn't see him close, and he was fair. I thought he might be a lawyer, about the money, but Aunt Augusta said no, she thought he was a lover of yours that you had run away from." Georgia's eyes were wide. "Was he? I thought he didn't

look the type of man to have a mistress, but Aunt Augusta said all sorts of men have mistresses."

Caroline reflected that Aunt Augusta was shrewder than she appeared, if deplorably lacking in discretion.

"I have no lover, Georgie," she said. "But I do know who the man was. He is a . . . friend of mine from London, not a lawyer or any such thing."

At this juncture Aunt Augusta returned with the tea and proceeded to enlighten Caroline on the subject of the money Georgia had referred to. Stirling, it seemed, had died, leaving her a legacy of three thousand pounds.

For a moment all Caroline could think was that Stirling had died. Even with all his peculiarities, he had been kind to her and Caroline had liked him. It was dreadful to think he had died, months ago, and she had never known about it. After a time, the rest of the news sank in.

"Three thousand pounds, Aunt? Are you sure? It wasn't three hundred, perhaps?"

Aunt Augusta nodded and shook her head at the same time. "Three thousand it was, for sure. Squire Bascombe had his solicitors in London inquire after you, but they said you had vanished without a trace."

Caroline considered that they could not have inquired very diligently or Mark would have heard something about it and told her.

"Well. Well, I shall be very glad of it, that's for certain. How does one go about collecting a legacy, do you know?"

Aunt Augusta had the name of the man to contact, and Caroline resolved to stop the night so that she might begin the business in the morning. Once it was settled, she informed her aunt, she would be leaving for London. She would return to fetch Georgia, whose face fell when she heard she would not go immediately with her sister, in about a month. Six weeks at the very outside, she added reassuringly.

Aunt Augusta felt constrained to make some cautious remark about an environment suitable for a young girl. Caroline bit back a caustic counter-remark about the suitability of Stirling Bascombe's hunting box for a young girl and commented only that since she was Georgia's legal guardian now that she had attained her majority, it was not really any of Aunt Augusta's affair. Aunt Augusta, cowed by the cold determined air with which this pronouncement was delivered, subsided.

The rest of the Birmingham visit passed without surprise, unless it could be said that the official confirmation of Caroline's legacy was a surprise. The attorney who handled the case was rather at a loss when a handsome young woman appeared in his office claiming to be the missing Caroline Skuttle, and he had Squire Bascombe called in to identify her. When the Squire, astonished and much impressed by her cool poise, had to admit that this was indeed the girl, the attorney became rather more conciliatory, and the affair was settled with dispatch. Caroline had to fend off a veiled proposition from the lawyer and a lewd insinuation or two from the Squire, but on the whole it was not too bad. Still, she was happy to leave Miss Skuttle behind when, Miss Dancer once more, she boarded the day coach of a fine spring morning and set off for London.

She rather regretted having left Georgia behind, for she would have loved to have someone to point out the sights to and exclaim over them with. Reveling in her new prosperity, she alighted from the carriage in the West End and proceeded by cab to Bloomsbury, all the while containing with a dignified, composed exterior the wildest excitement. She had come a long way, she congratulated herself, from the day when Colonel Warburton had condescendingly conducted her to her dismal lodgings in Ludgate Hill. Though she had in all honesty to admit she

had found them congenial, those lodgings had been really nothing less than squalid when compared to the quietly elegant house at which she now rang the doorbell with confident authority.

The place was already staffed, for Mark had exerted himself with unusual energy during the month between his betrothal and his wedding. He had hired a cook, a kitchen maid, a parlor maid, and a chambermaid, all of whom were introduced to Caroline with gratifying pomp by Bill, who had been elevated from general manservant to the lofty status of butler and was henceforth to be known as Haworth. Caroline, for her part, had not been lax in observing Cecily's manner of housekeeping and went to it with a will, so that by the time Mark and his bride arrived from Devonshire, everything was in perfect order with fresh flowers in every room and a pile of invitations on the silver salver in the front hall.

In another part of town, Geoffry continued serenely on his well-trodden path, quite untroubled by any foreboding of disruption in his peaceful bachelor existence. In his equanimity, he was at a loss to explain to himself the impulse that had sent him, pulses pounding, nerves aquiver, from Bath to the moribund little village of Walsall. Once he had arrived, wondering why on earth he had come, it was only due to his tidy habit of taking things to their logical conclusion that he had traced the Skuttles to Birmingham. By the time he had located the dingy street and dragged himself up the depressing stairs, he was heartily sorry he had yielded to the whim and could barely decide whether he was disappointed by Caroline's absence or whether he was glad to know she hadn't been near the dreadful place. He consoled himself with the not-entirely-candid reflection that he had never really expected to find her and that, anyway, he had intended no more than a brief social call. If he had rather uncharac-

teristically spent an expensive night on the town with the raffish younger set from his club shortly after returning to London, he did not connect this with his letdown in Birmingham. He felt, rather, that a man simply had to kick over the traces every once in a while.

He had, however, lapsed quickly back into his sane, well-ordered routine. By the time of the wedding at Willowview, he was able to play his part with avuncular complacence and, far from feeling dashed by Cecily's rejection, he considered himself well out of what would probably have been a misstep of some magnitude. Of course he expected to marry eventually, but he intended to make a well-reasoned, advantageous match. And for the immediate future, if he found himself in a mood for female society, he could either purchase it on a safe, simple short-term basis or seek it out genteelly at a polite, platonic tea party.

Or, he added mentally, at a posh evening bash. He stood before the mirror in a new suit of dinner clothes. Of course, conversation at such sorts of affairs tended to be most tedious, and one was frequently quite desperately bored, but the drinks were generally good and the food palatable, and, of course, one never knew whom one might meet.

He contemplated the possibility of making a worthwhile business acquaintance or acquiring some tip he might use to advantage on the Stock Exchange. It came to him associatively that he had been told the Butterfields would attend the party for which he was now dressing, and since he had not seen them since their wedding, he looked forward to meeting them. He adjusted the lapels of his coat precisely, straightened his cravat, evened his cuffs, regarded his natty reflection with satisfaction, and proceeded to the party in a humor as moderately enthusiastic as could be considered consistent with good breeding.

A couple of hours later, in a rather less agreeable frame of mind, he concluded that this was one of those dos which

would be universally proclaimed a success by virtue of its being voted by all who attended it a "sad squeeze." Geoffry was on the point of slipping out unobtrusively and had edged into a position not far from the door when he was accosted by a man named Murchison, whose one claim on Geoffry's attention consisted of the fact that he was interested in buying several shares in a company Geoffry was interested in selling out of. So the two of them stopped to exchange civilities. The conversation pussyfooted around the proposed Stockton-Darlington railway until Mr. Murchison's eyes suddenly opened very wide.

"Good God, Price," he exclaimed, looking over his shoulder at a point out of Geoffry's range of vision, "you should see the stunner that just walked in on Butterfield's arm!"

Cecily was an attractive girl in a sweet sort of way, but not what Geoffry thought one would normally refer to as a stunner. Still, he gave Mark the benefit of the doubt and said mildly, "He's just got married, you know."

"Yes," replied Murchison. "His wife's with him too, very pretty little woman, but there's another girl. Tallish blonde. Here, she's turned away. Look round!"

Feeling foolish to be gaping at some new arrival, Geoffry nevertheless did casually glance round. From the back the blonde looked very much like other blondes, only tall and very slim. Geoffry had a fleeting impression—but that was ridiculous.

"I'll have to defer judgment," he told Murchison wryly.

"Ah, ha!" cried Murchison a moment later, looking once more beyond Geoffry in a way that he found unusually irritating, "Butterfield, who's the gorgeous *inconnue*?"

Mark extended a hand first to Geoffry, then to his interlocutor. "Which?"

"*Which?*" echoed Murchison explosively.

Mark grinned. "The underfed one with the yellow hair?"

Murchison snorted at this blasphemy.

"A friend of my wife's," Mark explained, taking pity. "Girl by the name of Dancer. Price used to know her, I believe." He waited a merciful moment before continuing, "Caroline Dancer. That was it, wasn't it, old man?"

Geoffry, having lost his countenance and regained it in a moment, answered quite evenly, "I did make the acquaintance of a Caroline Dancer some months ago, but I don't think she was acquainted with Cecily Ernhaven. Perhaps this is a different Miss Dancer."

"I think not." Mark sounded positive. "She said she remembered you. She's spent the last half year in the country and got very thick with my wife in West Kennet. A lovely girl. Cecily is very fond of her, and I can't say I don't enjoy having her about to rest my eyes on now and again. Even a newly married man is not expected to be an esthetic imbecile."

Geoffry smiled. "Perhaps I should go round and see if it is my Miss Dancer after all. I should like to pay my respects to Mrs. Butterfield as well. Excuse us, Murchison?"

Just as Murchison opened his mouth to request a presentation, Geoffry bowed and turned away, gripping Mark's arm in an iron vise. "You bastard," he remarked, wearing a cordial expression. "Where did you find her and what the hell is she doing in a place like this? You might have given me a little warning."

"I *am* giving you warning," protested Mark, aggrieved. "Didn't I canter over to you the instant we set foot in the vestibule?"

"What's she doing with Cecily?"

"I told you. They discovered each other in Wiltshire. Bosom companions, they are."

"Good God! Does Cecily know?"

Mark smiled. "Oh, yes, dear boy. Never underestimate, you know. You're in for a bit of a surprise. Watch what you say to Miss Dancer."

"I shall." Geoffry's mouth tightened rather grimly. "I shall."

Cecily saw them coming and waved. Caroline was busy having her hand bowed over by someone she found tedious in the extreme.

"Jolly, how very tonnish you look," said Cecily.

"I might say the same for you," he returned. "Both marriage and London seem to agree with you excellently." He kissed her hand with just the faintest trace of absentness in his manner, and then turned with consummate coolness.

"Miss Dancer," he bowed. "I believe it's been some time."

My Lord, he thought, she is a stunner.

Caroline had always been a pretty girl, but since Geoffry had last seen her, Cecily and Cecily's new London dresser had taken her in hand, and together they had experimented until they had made quite the most of Caroline's looks. Of course, Geoffry never noticed that her eyebrows were more finely arched or that her lashes were darker. He did notice that she was almost ethereally thin and delicate-looking. He noticed that her hair, instead of being clustered in girlish ringlets, was twisted into thick ropes and coiled round her head like a medieval princess's. He noticed that the ivory satin of her dress gave her skin a magnolia-blossom glow. He noticed that her décolleté somehow contrived to be respectable and fascinating at the same time. He noticed that the deep blue eyes twinkled as they watched him look her over.

"My God, Miss Dancer, you are breathtaking," he said, very, very, softly.

The twinkle left the brilliant blue eyes. They were cool

and clear. "Mr. Price. How delightful to see you again," said Caroline in a beautifully modulated voice without a trace of a dubious vowel.

On his way home, several hours later, Geoffry reflected with unabated wonderment that it really was the most damnable thing. That she should pop up again after such a time! And in such an extraordinary way! So the "situation with a lady" had been at Willowview.

"She was there all the time, if you can believe it," Mark had recounted in some amusement. "She feigned an influenza to avoid meeting us. But then I found her out, and Cecily found us out, and straightaway she guessed it must be your girl. But of course by then they were staunch allies, and of course Cecily was hardly the sort to toss her to the wolves. She resolved that Caroline should have a chance to make a new start. So there you are: a new Caroline."

New indeed, thought Geoffry. He was not sure he liked it, but neither was he quite sure he did not. He had been intrigued, unable to keep away from her all evening. She had been beautiful, perfect in manners as well as looks, graceful, correct, witty, and apparently at ease in her surroundings. Geoffry recalled, with unaccountable poignancy, her wide-eyed bedazzlement in the Brighton hotel, her schoolgirl exuberance as she cavorted in the little green bedroom. He wondered if she had kept the name Dancer out of sentiment or simply because she could not come up with anything more to her liking. Tonight, she had danced. Reels, cotillions, even quadrilles, which Geoffry had never taken the time to learn. And waltzes. He had twice solicited a waltz, but both times Caroline had cried off, saying she was promised. Once he had got the feeling it was just an excuse. She had turned to Mark, who had risen admirably to the occasion, but Geoffry was sure he had not previously asked her to dance. They had melted

into the colorful swirl of dancers and left Geoffry with a curious little ache in the front of his shoulders.

On the whole, he decided, Caroline had been polite to him, but cold, and had lost no opportunity to show him she was not interested in renewing their acquaintance. Well, he thought, he would take his cue from her. They had been good friends once, as well as bad lovers, but if she chose to turn her back on good and bad alike, well, that was her prerogative.

This attitude of righteous resignation prevailed for nearly a week. Then, explaining to himself that he wished to make sure of his ground, Geoffry invented an excuse to call in Bloomsbury Square. He found a scene of general conviviality; a number of people scattered round the drawing room were engaged in relaxed entertainments. Caroline was playing loo with three gentlemen, of whom Geoffry knew one well, one vaguely, and one by reputation alone. The lady at the table was the only one who appeared much interested in the game. Everyone else was more interested in her.

"Mr. Horton," she cried in exasperation, "that is the third time you have overplayed my winning card! I shall never play partners with you again!"

"Play with Mr. Price instead," suggested Cecily, bringing him to the card table.

Caroline, not previously aware of his arrival, glanced round with a hint of panic in her eyes. She mastered it immediately.

"Are you lucky at cards, Mr. Price?" she asked with a suggestion of a wink at John Horton, who was so charmed at having once more rediscovered the elusive Miss Dancer that he had quite made up his mind to spend the whole spring in London.

"Ma'am, I have phenomenal luck at cards," Geoffry replied with a sober, quiet air that put Caroline out of countenance and puzzled the rest of the observers.

"My dear fellow, you have as much admitted yourself to be prodigiously unlucky at love," remonstrated Horton. "Don't you know the proverb?"

"Proverb?" echoed Geoffry vaguely. He knew the proverb, of course, as well as anybody.

"I think you must take the matter up without me," said Caroline, getting up and handing the cards to Geoffry. "I dare not play any more, though I am not sure whether I fear more to be lucky or unlucky!"

She slipped away with a gay little laugh and left all four men looking after her, each one wondering what was in her heart at that moment.

"Wherever did she spring from, this enchanting girl?" murmured one.

"Enchanting indeed," said Horton.

"Somewhere in the north," replied the third player, who was a literal-minded type. "But there seems to be a haze of mystery about it."

"Nonsense," asserted Geoffry. "She's an old friend of Mrs. Butterfield."

"You knew her before, didn't you?" queried the first man, the one with the dubious reputation.

"Not very well. She was just a child." Geoffry impassively shuffled the cards. "Shall I deal for whist, gentlemen?"

On the other side of the room, Caroline was busily making herself agreeable to an officious but good-hearted lady who, having known Cecily's mother many years ago, had appointed herself guardian angel to the household. Her name was Ford, and she was a widow. Caroline fancied she would make an admirable lady-companion when Georgia came and they set up house on their own, so she cultivated Mrs. Ford assiduously and appeared to take appreciative note of everything she said. At the moment Mrs. Ford was discoursing on the evils of gambling. Caroline had not, in fact, been gambling, but she

had been playing cards, and Mrs. Ford was never slow to deliver a well— intended homily. In this case, Caroline was hard put to keep up a semblance of attention.

What a nerve he has, she was thinking angrily! He has been hateful from the outset. . . pushy and . . . impertinent and . . . insinuating. He has taken every opportunity to remind me of the time when I was his . . . creature and to jeer at me. Unlucky in love, indeed! As if there were ever any love in it on his part. He is an odious man. I cannot see how I liked him at all. But one thing is certain: I shall very much enjoy cutting him down to size!

That she would be able to accomplish this, Caroline had not the slightest doubt. Or at least, none that she could not, by force of rationalization, dismiss as insignificant. If she had been able to lure him into indiscretion before, surely she would be able to do so again. But this time—she laughed to think of his humiliation when he would discover she had only been playing with him.

Someone commented, seeing her, that Miss Dancer was in looks tonight.

"Silly fool," murmured Horton, overhearing. "Miss Dancer is always in looks."

"Indeed she is," said Mr. Abingdon, the man with the reputation. "Was she pretty as a child, Mr. Price?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Price.

"You told us you knew Miss Dancer as a child. Was she as pretty then as she is now?"

Geoffry twisted round in his chair to consider the subject under discussion. The subject, gratified by his interest, smiled with bewitching modesty and then looked demurely away.

"I daresay not," Geoffry concluded, taking up his cards once more, "although at the time she seemed quite pretty enough."

"There's something there," Abingdon remarked to John Horton later, as Geoffry made trivial conversation

with Caroline just prior to taking his leave.

Horton replied with studied nonchalance, "Imagining things, old fellow," but Abingdon only smiled.

Much the same sort of smile was worn by young Charlie Stokely at the bank some days later as he walked briskly down the hall to Mr. Price's office, a different office now from the one to which he had brought a similar message some months ago. The hall was still narrow and ill-lit, but the door was rather closer to Mr. Avery's door and the title lettered after the name G. N. Price was rather more impressive. The clerk paused before the door, wiped the smile off his face, replaced it with an alert, efficient expression, and knocked.

When the response came, he stepped in briefly to announce, "A lady to see you, sir. Miss Dancer."

"Dancer?" said Price. "Oh, yes, I remember. She was here before. Didn't have an appointment then either, as I recall. Does she say it's urgent?"

"No, sir. She says if it's not convenient just now, perhaps you'll see her Wednesday morning."

"Well," said Price, "it isn't precisely convenient, but not inconvenient either. I'll come, Stokely."

Price got up and made his way into the foyer with a look Stokely could only describe to his wife as peculiar.

"There's more to that acquaintance than meets the eye," he pronounced knowledgeably. "We saw 'em together, remember, at Vauxhall last year. I wonder what she came to the bank for."

Geoffry, bowing over Caroline's cream-gloved fingers, had wondered much the same thing, but he refrained with difficulty from making any flippant references to the previous visit. Inside his office, Caroline glanced briefly at the gentleman who sat, discreetly turned away, at a desk on the other side of the room, and then lowered herself gracefully into a chair.

"I have come on business, Mr. Price."

"Business, my dear Miss Dancer, is always welcome."

Geoffry sat back in his chair, scrutinizing her curiously. Caroline wished the discreet gentleman on the other side of the room at Jericho.

"I have inherited a certain amount of money," she said in a low voice, "which I should like to deposit with you. £3000 to be exact, from an old gentleman who was kind to me some years ago."

Geoffry's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"He died last year," Caroline went on. "A Mr. Bascombe—I think I may have mentioned him to you."

"Oh, yes," said Geoffry, "the gentleman who liked poetry. He left you three thousand pounds, did he? That was certainly generous of him."

"He was a very kind man in his way. I was sorry to learn that he had died. I was from home at the time and only heard of it upon my return."

"How sad for you," remarked Geoffry politely.

"It was, rather." Caroline's eyes expressed for a brief moment the grief she had perhaps rather surprisingly felt. "There are some people . . . one knows they are going to die, but one never quite expects it to happen as it does. When I heard about it, I thought back to where I had been at the time: I was on holiday, by the sea. It seemed unfair, somehow, although as it was I had no way of knowing."

Caroline wondered why she was telling him all this. What could it possibly mean to him, that while they had been madly making love in Brighton, Stirling had been dying?

But it seemed to move him, for he said very gently, "Of course you had no way of knowing. But his bequest proves that he felt you were good to him when he needed you."

Caroline was quite provoked with him for being so kind and understanding. She drew back into herself and said

briskly, "Well, at any rate, I have brought you the money, Mr. Price. I have every confidence in your discretion, and I—"

Dear *God*, she thought, breaking off. She had never seen such a look on anyone's face in her life.

"I appreciate your confidence, Miss Dancer," said Geoffry, whose calm tone belied the murderous expression in his eyes, "but I think we should make some specific plans for this money before I undertake to accept it. If you'll just step with me into the inner office. . . ."

I knew there must be someplace we could be private, thought Caroline indignantly. How obnoxious of him to keep me out there playing cat and mouse while that fellow listened!

Intimating her feelings with a subduedly wrathful glance, Caroline allowed herself to be conducted into a small paneled chamber. Geoffry closed the door very quietly behind himself and leaned against it. He folded his arms across his chest.

"Now, Miss Dancer, what is it you expect me to do with this money of yours?"

Caroline gazed at him. He really was a good-looking man. Especially at such close quarters. "Well, that's not for me to say, Geoffry. Invest it or something—whatever it is you do with your money. You don't want to just stow it under a mattress in an old stocking."

Geoffry passed a hand across his eyes. "Caroline. Caroline, I think you must not realize the enormity . . . Caroline, did you really get this money from Stirling?"

"Of course I did. Why should I tell you I did if I did not?"

"God knows. Did he leave you everything?"

Caroline frowned. "Of course not. He didn't have 'everything.' I'll grant you, three thousand pounds is a lot of money, but don't you remember, it was his father who had title to the property. *He* didn't die, and if he could

have prevented it, he wouldn't have given me a farthing. He hoped, I'm sure, that I wouldn't show up within the stipulated delay, but I did, and he had to give it to me. I think the three thousand was Stirling's from his mother, and he could do with it as he liked. I found it quite touching that he left it to me, aside from being wonderfully useful, of course."

"But Caroline, surely you aren't offering me the *whole* of it? I mean, not that I. . . ."

He stopped speaking in some confusion when Caroline, her face flooding with enlightenment, began to laugh. She laughed and laughed, and Geoffry began to look more and more relieved. Finally she subsided, leaning weakly against the table on one hand and clutching his arm with the other to keep from falling down.

"You are mad," she declared, wiping her eyes with her handkerchief. "Completely deranged. *Three thousand pounds*? As a *bribe*? I'd as likely offer you another pot of lobster stew."

"That I might consider," he smiled.

"Oh, dear boy," said Caroline, patting him on the arm. "I have not had such a good laugh in years. How *could* you imagine I should offer you my precious windfall merely to insure your silence about that old affair? *Three thousand?* You must have thought I inherited a million!"

Trying not to look as foolish as he felt, Geoffry pointed out that such phrases as "confidence in your discretion" were open to misinterpretation.

"But *such* a misinterpretation!" Still chuckling, she concluded, "Come now, take this money and put it in your bank. And I insist that my receipts be filled out in the presence of my solicitor."

"Have you got one?"

"No, but I wonder if perhaps I had not better get one, or I shall be involved in some sharp practice before I know what I am about!"

"Miss Dancer," Geoffry said softly, "I'm afraid it's very close to closing time. Perhaps we could discuss this further over some supper, say this evening or tomorrow?"

Ah ha, thought Caroline. Now we are off to the races. "I daresay we might, sir." she smiled.

"Tonight?"

"Tomorrow."

Tomorrow turned out to be a rather busy day. Caroline signed the papers for the small furnished house she was to let in Galen Place, not three minutes from Bloomsbury Square. She and Georgia would be able to move in immediately. Mrs. Ford, who had agreed to provide them with the requisite resident respectability, arranged to transport her belongings so that she would be there to supervise the delivery of Georgia's new piano. Caroline purchased a ticket on the day coach to Birmingham for the next day following and packed the few things she would need after sending a letter off express to warn Georgia of her arrival. By evening, she declared to Cecily that she was worn to the bone and would almost rather stay home and go early to bed than go out and do the town. But this, of course, was a piece of strategic dissimulation. Cecily was undeceived, but for quite the wrong reasons.

"They have been rather a time about it," she observed to Mark, "but it seems that a reconciliation is finally in the offing."

"Stop matchmaking the poor devils," replied Mark. "Personally, I think it's a dead issue and far better not resurrected at all. Only likely to provide more unpleasantness."

Cecily laughed. "Are you thinking of Caroline's so-called revenge? Don't be absurd! She's forgotten all about it."

For the first few hours of the evening, Caroline did in fact do just that. In deliciously high spirits, she bantered

her escort about his "business meeting," which had burgeoned into a light refreshment in Regent's Park, an evening at the theater, and supper afterward at one of the nicer restaurants in the Strand. As they strolled along the neatly graveled roadway of the Inner Circle, the subject of business came up for the first and last time that evening.

"I can either put your money in the general fund, you know, or I can invest it privately. In the first case, the risk is less, but the rewards are proportionately less, too. If I am given full discretion, I shall sink the bulk of it, along with a substantial amount of my own, into the Stockton-Darlington. It will take a few years to come to much, and of course there is always the possibility that it, and I, will go bust."

"Not," interrupted Caroline, "a very strong possibility, the way things have been going for you. And as for full discretion, well, I don't see why not. I can't invest quite the whole of the three thousand, for I shall need some to live on, but I can go on for a bit of a while on the proceeds of the last venture, the one Mark engineered for me. Still, I've bought Penny back from him—wasn't he a dear to keep her?—and I plan to live in some sort of style. So what I want you to do for me, my dear, is make me a lot of money and pretty quick."

Geoffry laughed. "Oh, is that all? An original ambition! I'm sure nothing could be simpler."

"For a man of your talents," she replied, "I expect that is true."

The conversation thereafter returned to Penny and thence to horses in general and in particular, and business was forgotten. So, almost, in the delightful spring-fresh atmosphere, was the play. They arrived late at Covent Garden and had to wait till the end of the first scene to be seated, but their enjoyment of the spectacle was in no way diminished by this happenstance. *She Stoops to Conquer* was the play that had been selected for the evening's

entertainment, and at first Caroline suspected that there was in this choice a sly reference to her own acrobatics on the social ladder. But after a while she abandoned such reflections; she was too much diverted to waste time on grievances.

At the close of the performance, which Caroline pronounced capital and Geoffry agreed to have been tolerably well produced, they made their way at a smart pace down into the Strand, hoping to arrive in the vanguard of the aftertheater supper crowd. They were seated promptly and agreeably at a small, not too well-lit corner table, and enjoyed an excellent supper of stuffed squab, ham in honey sauce, tiny new peas, sherry trifle, and champagne.

Notwithstanding the dimness of the corner, Caroline's animation and her shining golden hair caught the attention of a number of other diners, the more brazen of whom made a special trip past her table to get a closer look. One of these latter, on the pretext of greeting a friend on the far side of the room, dragged in his wake a timid young companion who, to the astonishment of everyone present, suddenly let out a cry of dismay and leapt to the side of the lovely blonde in the corner.

"Why, Captain!" gasped Caroline.

"Miss Dancer!" hissed Tilsitt in an urgent undertone. "I mean . . . what was it? Miss Thorpe—"

"Sir," put in Geoffry dangerously, but the young captain rushed on.

"Never tell me you and my cousin have parted company, Miss—my dear lady! She wrote that she liked you extremely, that you were the best of friends."

"Oh, yes, we get on famously, I do assure—"

"Then what merciless Providence has allowed you to fall once more into the clutches of this . . . this . . . ruffian?"

The Captain's voice, no longer an undertone, was so clearly audible on the last word and the look he cast at

Geoffry so ferociously distasteful that there could be no mistaking his meaning.

"I beg your pardon!" cried Geoffry, jumping to his feet.

"Ruffian, sir," repeated Tilsitt, standing to attention. "And rascal, sir, as well!"

Caroline gazed in awful fascination as the two men glared at each other within an ace of coming to blows. She grasped out at the only straw she could manufacture. "If you two gentlemen intend brawling in this public place," she murmured acidly, "I beg one of you will escort me to a cab before you begin."

Geoffry, recovering his presence of mind, managed a glacial bow for Tilsitt, took his lady's arm, and proceeded toward the door while an anxious waiter skittered along beside them attempting to present a bill.

"Now, Geoff," Caroline admonished in an agitated whisper, "Tilsitt is a silly goose and three parts drunk besides. You don't care a pin for what he says. It's all a misunderstanding. I can explain!"

"Just a moment," said Geoffry.

He put her into the cab and signaled the driver to wait. Then he strode purposefully back into the restaurant, and it was several minutes before he reappeared. Caroline had dreadful visions of Captain Tilsitt stretched out on the floor, bleeding from the nose.

"What . . . what did you do, Geoff?" she asked anxiously, as he got into the cab beside her and they moved off.

"I did what any decently bred man of honor would do in a similar situation." He smiled to himself. "I presented the Captain with my card. I also paid my bill."

"Oh," sighed Caroline in relief. "But," she continued as a new thought struck her, "your card? Doesn't that mean. . . ?"

"It means merely that the incident is not one which can

be dismissed without some sort of further action. Now, what is this explanation you mentioned a few minutes ago?''

Caroline devoutly wished she had stayed home tonight after all. ''It's all my fault. I . . . I'm afraid that in order to impress Tilsitt with the urgency of my application for the position at Willowview, I represented myself as a . . . besieged bastion of maiden virtue.''

''The besieger, I presume, being identified as myself.''

''He saw us at Vauxhall,'' she pointed out apologetically.

''I see.'' Geoffry twisted his moustache. ''And he swallowed it? What a ninnyhammer!''

Caroline frowned, insulted, but she said lightly, ''Now I shall simply tell him that I am convinced your intentions were not so deplorable as my inexperience made me imagine them, and that he must apologize—''

''—In writing—''

''—In writing, for being rude to you.''

A silence fell. The easy comaraderie of the evening had dissipated. In its place was a tense feeling of constraint which made each one wish to know the other's thoughts, while neither dared to express his own.

''That fellow Abingdon was there,'' Geoffry remarked.

''Where? At Caldwell's? Did he hear us?''

''I don't know. But I'd lay odds he has Tilsitt at his table right now, discussing the business over a glass. I almost dragged the little ass out with me to keep him away.''

''Oh, you should have!'' Caroline exclaimed.

''Well, what does Tilsitt know, anyway? Just that you patronized the Gardens at Vauxhall one night in my company. And that I was supposedly out to seduce you.'' He laughed, then turned it into a cough. ''At any rate, neither of those things could do your reputation much harm—my reputation, maybe, but not yours.''

Caroline twisted her hands in her lap. ''But Mr. Abing-

don! He's clever. And he's suspicious already. I can tell."

"Perhaps Tilsitt will hold his tongue. He has so far, remember, except for the one moment of surprise."

Caroline found that her nervous fingers had been enclosed in a strong, warm clasp. She stifled an unworthy impulse to lean her head wearily against the friendly shoulder beside her and resolutely but gently extricated her hands.

"What a coil it is," she said. "I really can't see why people must concern themselves with my past."

"Let's not," said Geoffry. "Let's talk about your future instead."

The cab had arrived in Bloomsbury Way, and Geoffry stopped it on the far side of the square. He took her arm to walk across among the young trees.

"Tell me, what is the new Caroline's new program?"

With a start, she recalled that her foremost project, beyond which she had hardly thought at all, was to wreak vengeance upon this very man who was so companionably sauntering beside her in the moonlight. It was true, she admitted to herself, he had been charming this evening, friendly but polite, except for laughing at Tilsitt's faith in her virtue. One evening of good behavior could hardly make up for the execrable treatment she had suffered at his hands in the past, but still. . . .

As she was vacillating in her silent ruminations, Caroline failed to notice that the grip on her arm was tightening and that the pace of their progress across the midnight-silent square had slowed considerably. She was taken off guard when her partner stopped walking to take her lightly by the shoulders.

"No program, my dear? Will you simply live for each moment as before?"

Don't you dare, she warned him silently. Don't you dare kiss me.

If there had been more light than the soft silver of the

half-moon, perhaps he would have seen and might conceivably have heeded the subtle discouragement in her eyes. But as it was, he saw only a lovely pale flower of a face looking up into his.

That does it! Caroline assured herself angrily, as she felt the familiar tickle of his moustache against her mouth. Unaccountable tears pricked behind her eyelids. *Damn* his impudence! He thinks he can do what he likes with me, maul me in the public street like a common trull. I *shan't* forgive him! How could I have wavered even for a moment? Stirring herself into a righteous fervor, she broke away from him. But on the principle of allowing him enough rope to hang himself, she made no demur when he slipped an arm about her waist. They walked the last few steps across the pavement to the Butterfields' front door.

"When shall I see you?" he asked. "Will you ride with me tomorrow evening?"

Caroline smiled down at her hands. "Why not?" she replied, knowing full well she would be on the coach to Birmingham.

"I'll call for you at half-past five then, if I may."

"Very well," said Caroline. "Thank you for a lovely evening. I enjoyed the play very much."

He made as if he would kiss her again, but she hastily rang the doorbell. He released her and moved away.

"Remember Tilsitt's apology, won't you? I've not much more stomach for being shot at by him than he has for being shot at by me, I dare swear."

"Of course," said Caroline, who had completely forgotten.

She dashed off a note to the Captain as soon as she got upstairs to her room. Although she embroidered a bit, she did tell him much what she had indicated to Geoffry, and she was confident that the required apology would be forthcoming. To Geoffry, however, she did not write until

just as she was leaving on her journey, and even then she did not send the gaily casual note round to his lodgings but left it with the butler, so that when Geoffry arrived in riding dress at half-past five, he was met by an expressionless servant and greeted momentarily by an embarrassed Cecily, who came down from dressing for dinner to convey Caroline's regrets. Mystified, Geoffry nevertheless understood that despite the cloak of hypocritical apologies he had been offered a deliberate slight. Very much offended, he retired from the field with an impression of having been capriciously betrayed.

XIV

When Caroline returned to London with an ecstatic Georgia in tow, she found a letter from Captain Tilsitt, which indicated that the quarrel with Price had been successfully patched up. She congratulated herself that the encounter had not had any serious repercussions and went about her business. For some days the new household in Galen Place was much occupied in establishing itself, in making comfortable arrangements for Mrs. Ford, in finding a music master for Georgia, in seeing that Caroline's acquaintances knew where now to find her. Along with many others, Geoffry received a card informing him of the days when Miss Dancer would be "At Home." Alone among the recipients, he consigned the card to the wastepaper-basket, vowing that if Caroline expected to see him again, she must make more significant overtures than that. When he chanced to meet her at a party, he contented himself with a cool bow, replied to her superficial civilities in terms repressively noncommittal, and passed on as soon as it was decently possible to do so.

Mr. Abingdon, standing at the same party with a group of people not far away from the scene of this encounter, failed to respond to his lady companion until she had asked him twice for another drink. Coming to himself, he took her glass with a pleasant smile and meandered off in search of a waiter.

"That bastard," muttered Mrs. Wells to Miss Chapin, her bosom friend. "This is the first time I've seen him in ten days. He *says* he's been out of town. I think I'd best give him the boot before he has a chance to throw me over."

"I think, my dear, it is a sad fact of nature that our friend has a roving eye," commented Miss Chapin, tilting her elaborately coiffed raven locks in a certain direction.

"Itches in his breeches is what he's got," rejoined Mrs. Wells in a caustic tone. "I don't give a damn for his eye."

Abingdon gracefully moved to Caroline's side and offered her the glass of champagne Mrs. Wells was waiting for. Caroline took it.

"You're very kind," she said. "The heat in here is almost overpowering."

Abingdon smiled. He rarely showed his teeth when he smiled, but his eyes wrinkled charmingly at the corners. "I'd suggest a walk on the terrace, Miss Dancer, but you'd only think me uninventive and refuse anyway. So perhaps I can offer you a chair instead?"

"If you can find one," returned Caroline, "you're either a genius or a thief. Which is it?" she added a few moments later, when he materialized with a light but comfortable little caned chair.

He smiled again. "Why not both?"

Caroline laughed and sat down.

Mrs. Wells, some distance away, snarled and turned her back.

"I have been meaning to call on you, Miss Dancer,"

went on Abingdon, leaning cozily over her chair. "As I recall, you receive on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Yes, indeed. And a jolly time we have of it! I vow, I have learned more games of cards than I ever knew existed. And my sister has begun to get over her shyness about playing for people, so we often have music. She is having lessons with Signor Pignatelli. He seems to be quite good, but I hope someday for the conservatory in Paris. When one has a real talent, it's such a shame not to develop it to its fullest, don't you think?"

"Are you lucky or unlucky these days at cards?" asked Abingdon.

Caroline started, unsure how to take this abrupt remark. But she smiled and made the rocking continental gesture, palm downward, fingers extended, to indicate that her luck had been running so-so.

"The fates have not yet made up their minds," interpreted her companion. "I must come try my luck. Tell me, when am I least likely to find a mob, all trying to monopolize the hostess, just as I wish to do?"

Warily, Caroline gave an evasive answer. Abingdon sensed her reluctance and would have used some subtle means to overcome it, but he saw several people bearing down upon them and was forced into direct action.

"I have a little matter on which I am anxious for your private opinion. In short, I should very much like to see you alone for a little time."

Caroline raised her eyebrows. "My private opinion? What sort of matter?"

"Private." He smiled. "Please. My ploy has come to the end of its effectiveness. I knew I couldn't hope to hide you all night in this chair, and here comes a horde of your admirers. Tell me which morning I may call."

Flustered, Caroline said, very well, he could come some morning this week. Friday? Well, yes, Friday, if he

liked. He took up her hand, kissed it lightly, then bowed to the new arrivals and wandered off.

"Oh, Eliza, your champagne," he recalled brightly as he approached a fulminating Mrs. Wells. "I do beg your pardon. Let me get you another."

"Don't bother," snapped Eliza, whose slanting green eyes, her best feature, glittered like fine emeralds.

"Oh, have you got one from the waiter? It's really the best way in a crush like this. When you send people off for things, they tend to get lost and take forever to find their way back."

"I noticed that."

"Did you, my dear?" Abingdon's voice had softened. He moved closer to the lush, satin-draped figure. "You generally are so lively at these affairs that you don't know whether I'm about or not. Are you ready to go home?"

"When I am, I shan't want you," said Eliza.

Abingdon succeeded in producing a tolerably dismayed expression. "Am I to take this as—"

"You are. Good night, sir."

He bowed deeply. "Good night, madam."

When she had stepped away, he straightened up and strolled off toward the gaming room with the look of a man very well satisfied with himself.

It was not until Caroline was on her way home, escorted by an attentive Johnny Horton, that she remembered Abingdon's presence at the restaurant the night of Tilsitt's quarrel with Geoffry. While this fact did not seem to give her any insight into the nature of his business with her, it added to her vague feelings of uneasiness. She found that, far from wishing to put off Friday's interview, she was in fact eager for it to come and be done with. Abingdon was a pleasant man, very polished and undeniably attractive, in a middle-aged sort of way, but somehow she could not be comfortable with him.

All through her Thursday "At Home," Caroline was abstracted, and several people wondered if she was not feeling quite well. In the end, she left the entertaining to Georgia and Mrs. Ford for a while, retiring to her room to return only toward tea time, when Georgia had been prevailed upon to play a Mozart sonata. By a curious but not uncommon quirk of psychology, when Friday morning came Caroline had entirely recovered her composure. She had talked herself back into a certain measure of confidence and convinced herself that Abingdon's private matter could be no more threatening than an appeal to her taste in the matter of a gift for his mother or, possibly, his mistress. At the remotest range of possibility, he might have intentions of seducing her by means of some clever lure. She resolved to accept no invitations to go out with him and to keep Mrs. Ford in close reserve.

By the time Abingdon was announced, she was able to receive him with effortless grace. She put down her teacup, ordered another one for him, and bade him sit down, which he did. Then she pointed out that Mrs. Ford was upstairs finishing her morning correspondence, which would probably occupy her for another quarter of an hour or so. Caroline hoped that would be ample time for Mr. Abingdon's requested private interview. Mr. Abingdon said he thought it would. Then he sat back and regarded her with shrewd, amused eyes.

"Miss Dancer, I salute you."

"That is very kind, I'm sure," said Caroline. "Can I offer you some tea?"

Nodding, he smiled. "You are wonderfully cool. You see something coming; you don't know what, but you see it. And there is no fear, just an alert, wary intelligence. You are like a clever little fox, not yet sure which way to jump, but poised to spring."

"So far as I know, Mr. Abingdon, female foxes are

generally known as vixen, and that is not a compliment to a lady. I think you are less than polite. One lump or two?"

"One."

He reached out a bejewled hand to receive the cup. It occurred to Caroline that he was very like the man in the opera cape in St. James' Square on the night of her departure for Willowview. Like that anonymous Somebody, he was neither very young nor particularly handsome, but he had an air, and Caroline knew for a fact that he was nobly connected. Perhaps that was why he always gave her a feeling of being patronized.

"Miss—what *is* your name, my dear, or will Caroline suffice?"

Caroline's heart leapt. "My name is Dancer, sir."

"Not Thorpe? Or something else entirely?"

"My name is Dancer," she repeated stubbornly.

"What has happened to poor Jenny Thorpe? Have you done her in?" There was laughter in his voice, but there was compassion as well.

Caroline stared at the teapot. Jenny. Tilsitt had not mentioned the name Jenny at the restaurant, she was sure. Abingdon had found out more. How much more? And why?

"I do not understand why it should please you to probe into the misfortunes of my past. No gentleman would do so, and surely no gentleman would be so unkind as to taunt me with his discoveries. You can have no generous object in doing so." Did he intend to blackmail her? Surely he had more money than she could ever hope to have.

Abingdon sipped elegantly at his tea, his legs crossed at the knee, his rather brown face perfectly good-humored. "That is not entirely true, Miss . . . Dancer. I do have a selfish object, but there is benefit in it for you, too. As a man of some experience, my dear, I have learned to recognize an adventuress at fifty paces. The young

Captain's outburst the other evening merely confirmed my suspicion that you were not always what you are now. I might, I think, ferret out the full details of your career, but I can see no reason why I should do so, except to satisfy a vulgar curiosity. And, although I may not always be the perfect gentleman, I can assure you I am never vulgar. I have made it my business to discover and disclose the foregoing tidbits of information merely in order that we not waste each other's time with bootless denials and feigned expressions of outrage on your part when I make my . . . proposal."

Caroline's eyes darted icicles. She waited.

"My dear, you must not misunderstand me. I have nothing but the highest regard for your person and your accomplishments. I believe that you have made yourself an object worthy to shine in the best society."

"Indeed?" said Caroline.

"I offer myself as your passport to that society. You could find yourself on the brink of a brilliant future—as my mistress."

"You consider that being your mistress would represent a brilliant future?"

He laughed. "*Touché*, ma'am. I mean that being my mistress would put you in a position from which you might build yourself a brilliant future. Right now you are scratching and clawing to gain a precarious foothold in the world of the more or less high bourgeoisie. I, on the other hand, belong to the great world—the world of titles, family fortunes, mansions and ministries. Think what I could do for you! If you played your cards cleverly—and I think you could, for those are the cards I think your luck runs in—who knows what heights you might not eventually attain?"

Caroline contemplated her fingernails, feeling rather ill. It was so true, so damned true. She had worked like a

demon for her flimsy shred of bourgeois respectability, her shred of artificial bourgeois respectability. It could give way, and they would be quick to despise her. And she despised them for their superficiality. But she had begun to like being respectable, to like her new style of life, and, above all, to like her new self.

"I think you make more of my ambition than it is, Mr. Abingdon," she said at length. "I have very little desire to be a grey eminence, political or social."

"Perhaps not," he said. "Then why not try me just for fun?"

As she looked at him, with his engaging smile and his massive ruby ring, Caroline realized that life with a man like him might be fun indeed. He could laugh at scandal, make as much of her as he pleased. He would take her everywhere, introduce her to everybody. Of course plenty of people would snub her, but plenty of people also would not, because Abingdon was Somebody. Her head began to swim. She suddenly thought of how many months it had been since she had been to bed with a man. Then she thought of the last man she had been to bed with.

"Mr. Abingdon, I can't answer you. I simply can't."

She stood up to indicate that she wished him to go. He stood up, too.

"Will you . . . will you give me away?" she whispered.

He gazed at her in mild perplexity. "Give you away? Oh, you mean expose you as a former lady's maid and . . . so forth? You think I mean blackmail—your body for my silence?" He shrugged lightly. "That is not my intention."

This time when he smiled, his teeth flashed, white and even in his dark face. As he crossed the room to her side, he reached into his coat and pulled out a slim, flat box covered in black velvet. Caroline stared at it.

"I am not the blackmailing sort, my dear. Blackmail is a negative mechanism. It says, if you don't do what I want, I shall do something nasty. I prefer the positive way which says, if you do what I want, I shall do something nice. I daresay both methods have their effectiveness, but people tend to like one better when one offers to do them good rather than ill. And I, in a case like this especially, prefer to be liked."

Caroline stared at the box. He put it behind his back and tilted up her chin so that she looked into his face.

"One thing. You have unfinished business with Mr. Geoffry Price."

Caroline blinked. Abingdon's eyes flickered to her mouth and his lips parted slightly, but then he went on in the same easy tone.

"Forget him, my dear. He is not your sort of man. They're laying odds he marries Lord Redford's niece before the year is out. 'Twill be a pretty coup for him if he can bring it off. I don't know if he will, but if he doesn't land this one he'll go after another of the same ilk. Depend upon it, my dear, Geoffry Price knows what's good for him. And I know what's good for you."

He brought the box round to where she could see it. Caroline couldn't help herself; she stared. With the flick of a finger, he opened the lid to reveal a diamond bracelet that flashed white fire in the sunlight. Caroline shivered. Right there, in that one box, was more money than she had ever seen in her life. And that would be only the beginning. For a moment she forgot Stirling's legacy and the security it had brought her; all she could remember was being poor. And being afraid, desperately afraid, of being poorer, of being hungry, and cold, and having nowhere to go, of nothing turning up, of taking to the streets. In a daze, she allowed Abingdon to fasten the bracelet on her wrist. He kissed her palm as he did so, and the pressure of

his lips brought her slowly to herself. She poised her fingers gracefully, admiring the effect of the jewels against her skin. She could feel her heart pounding, and she knew her eyes danced with excitement.

"Your first draught of champagne," murmured Abingdon. He chuckled deep in his throat. "My little beauty, I shall see that you have enough diamonds to be drunk on."

"I can't . . . I can't think properly. I can't give you an answer yet," Caroline stammered. She fumbled with the clasp of the bracelet, but he held her fingers still.

"Keep it."

She shook her head desperately. "No. No, I mustn't. You must take it back."

"I won't!" Raising both hands in the air, he moved off, laughing. "It is yours to ponder on. Finish your business with your old lover, my dear, and then we shall speak again."

"Mr. Abingdon!"

"Caroline, my given name is Victor," he said. "Ponder that, too, if you will."

Still laughing, he bowed at the door and withdrew.

Left alone, Caroline sat down on the sofa to catch her breath. After some moments of staring into space, she turned her attention to the vexatious bracelet which, she discovered, was provided with a safety catch that had hitherto thwarted her efforts to unfasten it. Discovering the trick of it, she removed the bracelet, but when she found she had nowhere safe to put it, she fastened it back on again.

Enough diamonds to be drunk on—how many would that be, she wondered? She held her arm up to the mirror and turned it this way and that, watching the play of light on the facets of the stones. What did it cost, a bracelet like this? What if she kept it, sold it, and ran off to Paris with

Georgia? Along with Stirling's legacy, she would have enough to keep them both decently for years!

Right now, she told herself, slumping dejectedly against the sofa cushions, enough nonsense. It will go back to Abingdon. Immediately! She got up, addressed a hasty note to Abingdon, recollected she hadn't the faintest idea where he lived, and sat down again.

Lord Redford's niece? Devil take it, who was Lord Redford's niece? Surely not that pasty-faced little frump she had seen Geoffry riding with last week, the one with the hideous, if vastly fashionable, hat and the overbred little grey mare! Lord Redford's niece! Above Geoffry's touch, surely. What if she had made sheep's eyes at him all the afternoon? A fright like that would fawn on anybody who could be persuaded to speak civilly to her! Lord Redford's niece. She didn't even bear thinking of.

Accordingly, Caroline ceased thinking about her and returned to thinking about Abingdon. She was mercifully interrupted by the arrival of her sister, fresh from a music lesson and flushed with triumph.

"He says I am improving prodigiously in my solfeggio, Carrie, and you know I hate solfeggio!" Georgia flopped down into a chair and tossed her hat onto a table. "He is such a dear man! I am quite three-quarters in love with him."

"So, I make no doubt, are most of his pupils," retorted Caroline. "If I had thought what I was about, I should have chosen you a prim little old lady."

"Oh, no," Georgia laughed, "I like my scales liberally laced with *bella-bella-bellissima*'s and a few *cara mia*'s thrown in for good measure. Ho, that's a pun!"

"Georgie, you are flippant. And I'm not sure I quite like the sound of these *cara mia*'s."

"Oh, it's just his manner, Carrie. And he is so *ancient*

there cannot possibly be any harm in his silly talk. *Ooh*, what have you got on your *arm*?''

Cursing inaudibly, Caroline abandoned the attempt to hide her bracelet and prayed that Mrs. Ford would not appear in the next few minutes. ''It is a band of diamonds, my dear, that was clamped onto my wrist earlier this morning. I have not been able to get it off. Will you help me?''

Quickly unlocking the safety clasp, Georgia held the bracelet up toward the window. ''Who gave it to you?'' she asked in a tone of false unconcern.

'' 'Tis no matter who gave it to me,'' rejoined Caroline, snatching the sparkling band and putting it into the bosom of her dress. ''It is going back to him by the next post—''

''By *post*?'' squeaked Georgia.

''—Or by special messenger or something. At any rate, I shan't let it stay here. If he thinks I can be bought for a diamond bracelet, he is much mistaken!'' There, she thought. Seen in that light, the whole question was easily settled.

It proved a matter of no great difficulty to procure from Mark Abingdon's direction in Curzon Street and to dispatch the bracelet, wrapped in a manner that did not advertise the contents of the packet. For a day or two thereafter Caroline started apprehensively every time Alice came to announce a visitor, but by the end of the week she had recovered her sangfroid and was able to face with equanimity the prospect of an evening party at which Mr. Abingdon was sure to be present.

''When shall I be allowed to go to parties, Carrie?'' Georgia asked wistfully, seated on the bed as her sister completed her toilet.

''When you are eighteen,'' was the firm reply.

''But that's *years*!''

"Seventeen, maybe, if anybody invites you."

"They'll invite me," replied Georgia confidently, "for I shall be the sister of the Toast of the Town."

"I shall be well past it by then; 'twill be your turn! There's the door. I must run, darling."

"It's just Johnny Horton," Georgia pointed out.

"Not 'just,' my love. He is a very dear boy, one of the truest friends I have."

"But he dotes on you so, Carrie. Don't you get sick of having him underfoot?"

Caroline's eyes were suddenly far away. "Sick of him? No, I think he's sweet. Don't you like him?"

Georgia shrugged indifferently, but then she sat up straight as Caroline stooped to take her earnestly by the arms.

"He wants to marry me, Georgie."

"Are you going to?"

"Should you mind? We'd be comfortable, secure for life. We might do worse, much worse."

"I don't mind, Carrie. I'm sure you'll do what's best for us."

The younger girl's face expressed such a world of faith and confidence that Caroline's look of distress melted into a sunny smile.

"That I will, my love—somehow!"

Later that night, she found herself wondering desolately if she would be able to. In the carriage, Johnny pressed his suit once more, his offers of financial and social security striking a responsive but unexciting chord. Caroline suffered him to kiss her hands and pet her a little, as she sometimes did, and as usual he contrived to make her feel more maternal than amorous. As he poured out his heart in a manner both touching and wearisome, she let her mind wander. She thought of Abingdon's lovemaking, so cool

and calculated it hadn't seemed like lovemaking at all, but it had been, in the sense that he wanted her and had been doing his best to induce her to take him. Then she thought of Geoffry. If Johnny's lovemaking was verbal and Abingdon's cerebral, then Geoffry's could be described as strictly corporal. When he wanted her, he just reached out with never a by-your-leave or an if-you-please. Caroline remembered the night he had kissed her in the square.

He simply took me for granted, she complained to herself. After months and months, he assumed I would fall into his arms again on cue. And then he had the gall to take a pet when he found I was not such a pushover as he imagined! What a perverse, conceited fellow he is!

In reality, Caroline was trying to regroup. She had considered Geoffry's behavior from all angles and was forced to concede that she had made a tactical blunder. The affair of the broken riding engagement had been a strategic display of forces, intended to lure the enemy forward. On the contrary, however, the enemy had dug himself deeper into his trenches and turned his face resolutely in another direction. Clearly, Caroline had miscalculated. Well, she assured herself, she hadn't yet admitted defeat. But she felt oddly listless about the whole business.

She tried to put some vitality into the gentle voice that quashed one of Johnny's more venturesome sallies, but she was so far from succeeding that he apologized for importuning her and asked if she had the headache. Gratefully, she accepted the proferred excuse by saying that she did, a bit. Johnny was then quiet, if tediously solicitous, and Caroline, feeling like a cad, did her best to lose him in the crowd as soon as they arrived at their destination.

She did not have sympathetic feelings about the party. It was a very large rout, full of women she did not really know and whom she was sure would be displeased to find

she knew their husbands or brothers. She stood, looking about for someone inoffensive to go talk to, and was startled when Abingdon came up unexpectedly from behind her and murmured in her ear.

"My dear Caroline, my dear, cruel Caroline, how delightful to see you."

Caroline jumped round to face him. He seized her hand and brought it to his lips before she could object.

"What an elegantly turned wrist you have, my dear. But regrettably bare. Ah, well."

Caroline knew she had done the right thing in returning the bracelet as promptly and impersonally as she had. There was something changed in his attitude. It was no longer condescending.

"Tell me, Miss Dancer, have you made any progress?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Caroline attempted vainly to retrieve her hand, which he held tightly in his own. So much for his cerebral approach.

"Your . . . unfinished business," Abingdon explained with a shadow of a nod at the door.

Geoffry had just come in and was speaking cordially to a small mousy girl in a beautiful dress and a man Caroline recognized immediately as Lord Redford. She thanked God it was a large party and turned her back on them.

"You exaggerate the extent of my acquaintance with Mr. Price," she said. "I see him occasionally on business; I have seen him once or twice socially. Nothing more."

"And for all that," mused Abingdon, "it isn't finished."

"Sir, you are mistaken!" Caroline replied, so sharply that even the persistent Mr. Abingdon deemed it prudent not to press the point further.

He's right though, thought Caroline. Dear Geoffry,

happily courting high-born little mouse-girls, may think it's finished, but it isn't. I have not yet quit the field.

As she looked about her, Caroline suddenly felt as if she would suffocate in the overwhelming atmosphere of gentility. She was sick of it, sick of it all: the polite commonplaces, the urbane smiles, the refined intonations, the well-bred gestures. She wanted to hitch up her skirts and run and shout and laugh. Her eyes sparkled dangerously; she flung back her head and looked up at Abingdon with a reckless smile.

"Victor, I am ready to die of boredom. Can you think of something more entertaining than standing about in this dreary crush?"

"Most assuredly," said Victor. "How about a jolly tavern, company vivacious but not exactly low, drinks hearty, food *idem*, conversation witty and varied, songs probably a trifle bawdy—but we can leave any time you say."

"It sounds perfect!"

When first they arrived at the Unicorn, Caroline, even in her daring mood, was afraid she had made a serious mistake in coming to such a place and with such a fellow as Victor Abingdon. Abingdon, however, gave the company to understand that she was a lady playing truant, and all those within close range made a good-natured effort to adjust their manners accordingly. After her first bumper or two of rich, fruity ale, Caroline found that everything about the tavern was as amusing as promised, and thoroughly enjoyed herself. She found nothing to cavil at in Abingdon's hand on her knee under the table, and laughed heartily at all the jokes, but when she found she was perilously near agreeing to dance a Highland Fling on the trestle with a kilted soldier, she told Abingdon she thought they should make their departure. When they had

drunk another health all round, amidst a flurry of convivial goodbyes, Caroline followed her escort out into the street.

When she woke up in the morning, it took Caroline several minutes to identify her surroundings. Gradually she recognized the green-and-white curtains, the chair, the picture frame; she was in her own modestly pretty little bedroom in Galen Place. Why this should be surprising she could not at first recall. Then her nostrils flared sharply as they caught a faint but unmistakable pungent scent. She shifted in her bed, making sure there was nobody there with her. There wasn't, but she was stiff and sore in a number of unequivocal places. Not least of these was her head. All the devils of hell danced a dance inside her skull.

Throwing back the bedclothes, she staggered across the room to the washstand, poured some of yesterday's cold water into the basin, and splashed it on her face. Unimpressed by the effect, she sloshed out more water and immersed her face till she had to come up, gasping and spluttering for air. Then she began to wash away the vestiges of the night's excess.

What have I done, she asked herself dully? How can I have been such a fool?

She tried to remember, but all she could summon up was a disparate collection of images. They were incoherent, but coherent enough. She saw a dark street and a small door and a narrow stair. She saw a little paneled room, cozy, with a lot of candles. She stood in the middle of the room, not seeing any more, just feeling, as each article of her clothing was stripped away, till she stood naked. There was a small fire at her back; it warmed the calves of her legs and played red and gold on Abingdon's face as he knelt before her, pulling her petticoats out from under her feet. He was laughing. She was laughing, too.

Then she felt her hands on him, pulling at his clothes, clumsy in her eagerness. They both laughed delightedly.

Drunken bitch, Caroline apostrophized herself. How could you?

She had no idea how she had gotten home. She supposed he had brought her back sometime in the night. She wondered if there had been any sort of scene. Well, she would find out soon enough.

When she emerged from her room some quarter of an hour later, she fully expected to find Mrs. Ford's bags packed, standing in the front hall, and the lady herself waiting stiffly in the sitting room with her farewell lecture all prepared. But it was no such matter. Mrs. Ford was indeed in the sitting room, but she was knitting composedly, and although she did remark with moderate disapproval that Caroline had come in rather late, she made no further comment before launching into a series of good-natured questions designed to elicit all the gossip Caroline might have heard at the party. Caroline answered as vivaciously as she could.

At first during the long, uncomfortable day, she expected Abingdon at any moment, come to claim her as his mistress. Then, when he had neither appeared nor sent word by mid-afternoon, she became convinced he despised her; he would spread the story of their debauch all over London and she would never be able to hold her head up again. Finally, just before dinner-time, Alice slipped into the sitting room with a magnificent bouquet of spring flowers to say that Mr. Abingdon presented his compliments and would Miss Dancer be willing to spare him a moment. She gritted her teeth and said that she would.

He appeared in short order, dressed with his usual raffish good taste, and without saying a word he strode across the room to bend very low over Caroline's rather

hot and unsteady hand. Somehow in that first moment he succeeded in restoring most of her shattered self-respect. By the time their eyes met they were both smiling ruefully.

"It wasn't planned, Caroline, I swear it."

"I believe you."

"Can you ever forgive me?"

"Maybe," she said with a twinkle.

He laughed. "If you are suffering from a head like mine, I'm grateful you can even consider it!"

"I am," she replied, pressing two fingers to her forehead. "Believe me, I am."

He looked at her with frank admiration. "Damn, but you are something! Most women would snivel or rant or swagger or frost over in self-defense—some damn tedious thing. But you . . . you just act like a rational, grown-up human being! And you are just as beautiful in the cold light of day with a blasting headache as you are by candlelight."

Caroline raised a skeptical eyebrow.

He smiled his flashing smile. "Well, almost. I know this is not the time to press you," he went on, lowering his voice as Mrs. Ford's footsteps sounded in the hall, "but I want you to remember: the diamonds are waiting for you. They won't wait forever, but they will wait for a while."

She smiled uncertainly, not knowing what to say.

"I can be discreet, too," he murmured. "You needn't necessarily give up your hard-won gentility. But you'll have to finish that unfinished business. I don't tolerate ghosts in my bedroom."

As he took his leave, bowing over her hand and that of Mrs. Ford in the doorway, Caroline thought, if it weren't for Georgie, I'd go with him in a flash. I might be sorry six months later, but I'd do it.

XV

For the next few days she went through her paces with a disagreeable feeling of depression and aimlessness. Abingdon's phrase "unfinished business" kept coming into her head, and though she felt a curious reluctance to do so, she began once more to consider the final stage in her scheme for Geoffry's punitive humiliation. That, she told herself, would finish the business for good, and then she would be able to think more clearly about the future. She fantasized about it. The basic idea was so simple: seduce Geoffry, then make a fool of him. It would gall him as nothing else could. How, precisely, to seduce a man with whom one is not on speaking terms posed something of a problem. Caroline determined that the only way to solve it was to create an emergency which would put them at once back on speaking terms and in an intimate situation. She was just at the stage of figuring out how she might plausibly contrive to break an ankle on his doorstep when a ready-made opportunity presented itself.

She had set out to buy a new hat. Besides undertaking a complicated and outrageous project, the next best thing for her morale had always been to buy a new hat. Since her morale was at a very low ebb, for no particular reason that she could discern, she decided to treat herself to a very special hat from the most prestigious milliner in town. That, of course, was Madame Iris, pronounced *à la française*, naturally. Madame Iris, impressed with her new client's striking good looks and apparent willingness to spend a handsome sum, offered a number of creations for

her consideration. One of these was duly selected after much arranging and rearranging, posing and posturing. It was put into a box and, having been paid for in cash, was lovingly borne away.

When Caroline had entered the shop, dark clouds had been lowering. By the time she left, a vigorous shower was imminent. People scurried here and there, seeking shelter before the storm broke, and hackney cabs were being filled and driven off as fast as they appeared. Caroline claimed one at the same time as a well-dressed gentleman opened the door from the other side. The gentleman, who had not the heart to deprive a lovely young woman of transportation, graciously yielded the cab to her. Caroline, wearing her best china-doll expression and carrying her hatbox as though it were a good deal heavier than it actually was, thanked him volubly.

Suddenly struck with a fatalistic feeling that today was the day, she added, "I am not going far, sir. If you would not mind sharing the carriage with me as far as Regent Street, I shall be happy to take you up."

The gentleman was as much pleased by the winsome smile as by the offer. He said she was very kind and sat down beside her, wishing that Regent Street were fifteen miles away.

In the event, it did seem farther than usual because the rain began to fall. The cab could only proceed at a circumspect walk as the horse picked its way carefully over the flooded cobblestones. In torrents, the water pelted down with a military rattle onto the roof. Then, just as the gentleman was trying to think of a genteel way to make conversation, Caroline signaled the driver to stop. When he did, she jumped out of the carriage, paid her fare, and scampered across the street with a smile and a wave. The gentleman carefully noted the number of the house into

which she disappeared, but when he came round next day to inquire if the lady had lost a glove, no one there had ever heard of her.

This was not surprising, as Caroline did not know anyone in that particular house. She had simply bolted for cover, and when a door opened in front of her she stepped in to find a birdlike little old woman gazing at her in some consternation.

"I thought ye was the missus, mum," said the woman. "I see ye're not, but I'm sure ye're welcome to step for a bit out 'n t' rain."

Caroline thanked her kindly. She asked for an old newspaper to cover her bonnet-box, then, with a little sigh and a squaring of the shoulders, she sallied forth into the downpour. She trudged along, with her feet swashing in her slippers, turned the corner, and rang the bell at number ten. Her ring was answered by the porter, who was horrified by her appearance.

"Lord, miss! You'll catch your death!" he exclaimed.

"Very likely," answered Caroline. "Is Mr. Price at home?"

"Yes, miss," said the porter. "I do think he is."

"I am fortunate he lives so near. There was not a cab to be had when the rain began."

She sighed audibly and brushed the dripping feathers out of her eyes with a wan little smile for the porter, who escorted her upstairs with very good grace for a man who generally refused to climb the stairs on any pretext.

Geoffry was reading. He had considered going out, but it had been such a filthy-looking day, he had decided to stay home instead. In his habitual fashion, he had divested himself of coat and shoes and sat beside the fire in his slippers with two stacks of papers, one read, one unread, beside him on the table.

He was roused by a vigorous knock, and the porter

announced in stentorian tones, "A lady to see Mr. Price."

"Caroline!" he gasped as he opened the door.

"May I come in?"

The voice was very timid. This ploy had seemed clever when she was sitting in the cab under the admiring eye of the unknown gentleman, but now that she was here, Caroline was cold and rather miserable. She wondered if she would be able to bring it off.

"Good God, Caroline, of course you may come in. Take off your hat—it's wet. Lord, everything's wet. However did you get caught in this rain?"

Geoffry stood back to let her pass, taking the big box from her in an instinctively chivalrous gesture and placing a hand under her elbow. Resisting the urge to collapse in his arms, Caroline gathered up her skirts gracefully, smiled at the porter, who nodded and departed upon receiving a coin, and stepped across the threshold. She protested that she would drip on Geoffry's carpet. She really was, she told him wryly, an awful mess.

"Nonsense," said Geoffry. "What's a carpet for?"

Caroline took off her much mistreated hat and was pleased to find that her hair was barely even damp. That was good: she wanted to look distressed, not wretched. She was beginning to feel better. Maybe she could bring it off after all.

Holding the hat by its ribbons, she laughed and asked, "What shall we *do* with the poor thing?"

"God knows." Geoffry glanced at the mass of sodden chip-straw and straggling feathers with distaste. "Chuck it there on the hearth. I'll burn it when it dries out a bit. It won't be good for much else."

Caroline obeyed. As she stood in front of the fire, drips from her skirts fell into the flames, evaporating with ludicrous little hisses like tiny snakes.

"What a business!"

She swung round to face her host. A proliferation of hisses ensued.

"Do you think your housekeeper would bring me a cup of tea?"

"Mrs. Murdock is not here." As Caroline opened her mouth to speak, he anticipated her. "Neither is Scofield."

Caroline looked stricken. "Oh, dear! I must go then." She swiveled round to pick up her hat, and the fire hissed ferociously.

Geoffry scowled. "You haven't explained to me how you got caught in the rain."

Caroline, halfway to the door, stopped to throw a mischievous look over her shoulder. "I'd tell you, but you'd never believe me. It sounds too much like one of my old stories."

In spite of himself, he smiled. "Even when you tell the truth it sounds like stories. Odd things happen to you, like meeting me and meeting Mark and meeting Cecily Ernhaven."

"Well, the man I met today is not likely to turn out to be one of my friends!" declared Caroline, launching with relish into her tale. She was in stride now. "He was very rude. I was in Bond Street when the rain came, and I was wet in an instant. There were no cabs to be had, absolutely none, so I was running back across the street to Madame Iris when a hackney coach stopped and the door opened right in front of me."

She laughed. Geoffry smiled at her.

"Really," she insisted. "I know it sounds quite magical, but . . ."

"Not magical at all. Anyone would pull up to let a pretty girl in out of the rain."

Caroline seemed, upon reflection, to consider this sensible.

"But then, Geoffry, he was not polite. He had on

beautiful clothes, I must say. I saw Count d'Orsay once, you know, and this man in the cab was very nearly his equal, sartorially. But anyway. As you know, I've got quite demure now, so I sat very meekly to one side of the cab. But he behaved as if I were a . . . a . . . God knows what."

Caroline's face wore a look of utter mortification. She bit her lip and stared at the carpet.

"Doing it rather too brown," remarked her companion drily. "Not only does God know what, but I know what, and you know what as well."

Caroline put up her chin, with an angry spark in her eye. "I see I have got from the frying pan into the fire. You are no more a gentleman than he was to mock me in distress."

Geoffry looked suddenly contrite. Whether he believed the story or not, he did believe that extraordinary circumstances had forced her to take refuge with him. It was inconceivable to him that anyone would go out into a drenching rain on purpose.

"I daresay you're right. I beg your pardon. But I am at least gentleman enough to insist you not go out into the rain again as you are. If you are determined to leave, which I find quite foolish, then I shall swathe both of us in warm cloaks and accompany you."

Caroline smiled. "That really is too kind of you. There would be just two of us wet, then, and what good would that do? I'd be grateful for the cloak, but I really don't need company."

Frowning obstinately, he replied, "Need it or not, you're going to get it."

This did not suit Caroline. She was vexed at finding her quarry completely alone, for she needed some sort of respectability-in-reserve. And she did not wish to launch her attack at her own house, for she did not wish her quarry to have an easy avenue of retreat.

"I'll tell you what. I'll show you my new hat. If no one has arrived by the time I have it back in the box, then I'll let you come home with me."

Geoffry did not appreciate the tone. It sounded rather as though she was speaking of a stray puppy. He stiffened slightly and agreed, acutely conscious of his slippers and his shirtsleeves.

Caroline smiled at him in her most celestial way as she unwrapped the new bonnet, leaning over the box in delight and showing a ruffled petticoat or two. Geoffry wondered why he had not noticed before that his stock had too much starch in it.

"There!" Caroline triumphantly raised out of the box a masterpiece in lavender and pale blue. It was round, with a broad curving brim and flowers of silk and gauze in several sizes. There were wide blue ribbons to tie under the chin.

"Isn't it divine?"

She danced drippily over to the mirror above the fireplace and lifted the creation onto her golden locks. Geoffry watched, spellbound, as she set it at the proper angle, tidied her hair, and made a large, crisp bow under her left ear.

"You see?"

"Turn round so I can get the full effect," he suggested, although his face in the mirror told her that he had received the full effect already.

"No, this way you cannot see my soggy, horrible dress."

She tipped her head this way and that to admire herself.

"Come, now, you are not gallant," she laughed, starting to untie the ribbons but waiting for him to speak. "You must say it's a lovely hat."

"It is a lovely hat. On you, it is a glorious hat."

His eyes tried to hold hers in the mirror, but, twinkling, they slipped away.

"Now that," she teased him, "was a pretty respectable compliment. Thank you. But," she added briskly, "no chaperone has appeared to safeguard my reputation, so I must be on my way. Might I trouble you for that cloak you were mentioning?"

Unobtrusively dragging his feet, Geoffry disappeared into another room and reappeared some minutes later with his coat and shoes on, carrying a driving coat and an opera cape. Caroline stood quite still as he arranged the folds of the cape round her shoulders with hands which were, she noted with satisfaction, not quite steady.

"It's a bit long," she mused, twirling out of his grasp and wrapping the cape round herself, "but on the whole I think it becomes me admirably."

She struck a pose just as there came a businesslike rap on the door. Not a moment too soon, she thought, watching the flame of annoyance leap in Geoffry's eyes.

He strode across the room to admit Mrs. Murdock, an autocratic-looking woman with an aura of eternal middle age about her. "Perhaps, Mrs. M.," said Geoffry, "you can convince Miss Dancer that she need not put up sail, now that you are here to protect her. She took shelter from the storm, but has declined to remain here alone with me."

Mrs. Murdock approved. Paradoxically, she also chided Mr. Price for having so much as considered allowing the young lady to go out into the rain again. Mrs. Murdock took charge, and within half an hour she had got Caroline out of her clothes, into dry, borrowed ones, and had, moreover, formed a very good opinion of the young lady. It seemed that Miss Dancer was a family friend of family friends. It was never said, but definitely implied,

that she had met Mr. Price through the wife of his colleague Mr. Butterfield. Mrs. Murdock did not approve of Mr. Butterfield, so long as he was absent, but she had heard Mr. Price speak very well of his wife.

After Caroline had been closeted in the kitchen with Mrs. Murdock for some time, Scofield knocked at the door. The last time Caroline had seen him had been when she was moving into her lodgings in Greville Street. To her intense relief, he greeted her as though he had never seen her before in his life. She gave him a charming smile.

"Mr. Price has asked me to mention that, as the rain does not appear likely to abate for some time, he would be pleased if Mrs. Murdock would prepare a light supper for him and his guest." There was a slight emphasis on the word "his" and an amused gleam in Scofield's eye.

"Mrs. Murdock and I have been having such a pleasant coze," explained Caroline, getting up. There was an answering gleam in her own eye. "Thank you so much for the dress," she added to the housekeeper. "I'm sure mine will be dry soon."

With another of her most enchanting smiles, she smoothed the white apron down over the serviceable blue dress, which was a size or two too large. She tied the sash a little tighter to emphasize her diminuitive waist and to heighten the effect of touching frailty. Quite well pleased with the way her venture was coming along, she went to join Geoffry in the sitting room.

He glanced up with an irritated expression of impatience, but his face quickly softened. "I could quite fancy you in a white apron," he said.

Caroline answered in arctic tones, "Indeed," but allowed herself to unfreeze in the next moment or two. She accepted a glass of sherry. As she took it, she saw his eyes shift past her to the wall above the sideboard, where she noticed for the first time the map of Brighton that she

had given him, matted and neatly hung in a walnut frame. She smiled to herself.

At first during the evening, Caroline felt that she had both her host and the situation well in hand. But she found that every turn of the conversation was reminiscent of their former intimacy, and the fact began to unsettle her. She found, after a while, that her arms and legs began to seem peculiarly long and awkward: as her companion sat quietly beside her on the sofa, she could not manage to arrange herself in such a way that she was not constantly touching him, his knee, his elbow, his fingers. When they sat down to supper, she found that the table was incommodious; she was not certain if it was his foot or the table leg that she kept grazing with her toe. As they ate, she felt herself looking at his hands and his mouth, and every time she saw his tongue she remembered his kisses, which had never failed to put her in a fever. It was not until he leaned across the table to slip a chosen sweetmeat between her lips that Caroline realized she was being seduced, as subtly and adroitly as she had imagined herself to be seducing him. Intensely annoyed, she rose from her chair within a very few minutes, declined another glass of wine, and insisted upon starting for home.

With perfect affability, Geoffry collected the wraps he had got out earlier, bundled both of them up against the unseasonable chill, called a cheerful goodnight to Mrs. Murdock, and accompanied his guest down to the street. As he held her arm to steady her on the stair, Caroline could feel his fingers against her breast. With a powerful feeling of revulsion, she realized she wanted him so much she could hardly walk.

Slut, she told herself. Too much for you, is it? Reverting to type now! Three glasses of wine and you're on your back for anything in trousers.

Shrugging off his distracting grip, she climbed into the

cab and chattered gaily but slightly idiotically all the way home, refusing to acknowledge the gentle but insistent pressure against her knee. At her door she jumped quickly out of the carriage.

"May I call on you tomorrow, Miss Dancer?" asked Geoffry on the stoop. His tone was perfectly neutral.

"Certainly, Geoff. I'm always glad to see you. I shall be home to visitors after two."

"Don't," he said, "be out of town." He bowed.

"Pleasant dreams, dear boy," murmured Caroline after he was gone.

With a satisfied if somewhat nervous smile, she went up to bed and did not, in fact, sleep very well herself. She kept thinking of Abingdon, of his strong hands and his agile, wiry body. Then she would doze off, and in her dreams Abingdon was Geoffry and Geoffry was Abingdon and she was frightened of both of them. She awoke in the middle of the night in a funk, wishing she might run away and never see either of them again. But, upon thinking it over in the stillness of dawn, she convinced herself that she could handle Abingdon and that, as for Geoffry, she would be only too glad to bring the whole relationship to an end. After tomorrow, no, today, he would be so furious he would never speak another word to her, and she would be able to put him out of her mind forever.

Upon arising, she dressed with particular care. She chose a new dress that was strongly reminiscent of the old green-and-yellow one she had worn at Brighton. The sea green flounces could hardly fail to remind him of the day she had bought her dressing gown and the several mornings she had spent sewing on the balcony. She tried hard to think of some maneuver whereby she could be caught in the dressing gown, but could think of nothing that was not hopelessly lacking in subtlety. So she fixed on the yellow

muslin, with little green slippers and a twist of green ribbon in her hair.

Splendid, pronounced her reflection in the glass. You are young, charming, bright as a daffodil. And yet. . . .

She added a touch more of her musky scent to the back of her neck and adjusted her stays so that there was a slightly rounder curve to her bosom. Now, she applauded herself, you are perfect! High priestess at a ritual sacrifice.

Geoffry appeared promptly at two o'clock. As she waited for Alice to show him in, Caroline suddenly found that she was not looking forward to this interview as much as she had expected. Perhaps in fact she could not manipulate Geoffry as well as she believed. Perhaps in fact she did not want to revenge herself on him in just this way. Perhaps in fact—

But he had already come in, looking his very handsomest. Caroline remembered that she had always liked his sort of clean, tidy good looks. His strapped cream trousers were so perfect that she wondered if he had been standing up all day so as not to crease them by sitting down. He wore a striped waistcoat of blue and gold that made her think of the hotel they had stayed in together. Abruptly she wondered if he, like her, had used an evocative strategy when choosing his attire for the day.

Right, she reminded herself, strategy: this is war.

"Good morning."

Putting down her needlework, hastily taken up for his benefit only a moment before, she came forward with a soft feminine sound of swinging skirts.

"My, what a handsome *tenue*! Wherever have you been today?"

"It's not where I've been, it's where I am," Geoffry replied. "Alice, will you leave us, please?"

Caroline gazed at him haughtily. "Alice takes her orders from me, if you don't mind, Mr. Price."

"I beg your pardon." He said nothing more, and Caroline had a feeling that he did not mean to open his mouth again until Alice was gone. Well, she thought, she couldn't have him standing staring stiffly at nothing all afternoon.

"Alice, perhaps you would be so good as to make us some tea," she suggested.

Alice, relieved, withdrew.

Oh, God, thought Caroline, as her guest turned slowly to face her. He is going to rape me. Where the hell has Mrs. Ford got to?

"Carrie," he began.

"Don't say it," she interrupted, panicked. "Just don't say it."

"Why not?"

She could not look into his face.

"I will say it, Caroline, and you will give me the answer I want."

Shall I? Caroline asked herself. Shall I indeed do exactly that? She brought herself forcibly under control and met his intense gaze.

"Carrie," he went on, "I am as mad for you as I ever was. I thought I was over it, but now I think I shall never be."

He paused for a moment, searching for words, graceful words, tasteful words, but they had abandoned him. His eyes caressed her and he whispered, "God, how I want you."

Damned right, raged Caroline inside, suddenly infuriated. But you won't have me! I'll not be your whore again, to love you with all my heart while you only lust and despise me. If I'm to be a whore, I'll be Abingdon's. I'll be *anybody's* but yours.

He had come up and taken her hands. "Carrie, my lovely girl, please come back to me."

Caroline's anger faded, leaving a vacuum behind it. She could not answer; she could not move.

"Remember, Carrie. Remember how it was, the two of us." His voice was ragged. "You wanted it yesterday; you were half sick with wanting it, wanting me. That sultry look of yours, Carrie. I know it so well! Let me see your face. You are wearing it now; you must be."

Caroline, feeling terribly weak in the knees, tried to disengage her hands.

"Don't be so bloody coy!" he cried, as she made a feeble movement to withdraw from him. He grabbed her round the waist and round the shoulders, pressing her body close against him. "Kiss me, you little devil! I'll be put off no longer."

Suddenly, from somewhere a long distance away, Caroline heard a low, feminine voice saying, "Mr. Price, I find you repulsive."

After one electric, incredulous moment, he dropped her like a hot brick.

There was a short pause, a gentle rustle, and then from a different part of the room the same unfamiliar voice said contemptuously, "My little charade has reached its predictable conclusion. You cease to amuse me. I wish you will leave."

"*Charade*?"

His voice cracked with outrage, and Caroline knew he understood. She couldn't see him; she couldn't see anything but a sort of mist, through which several shapes loomed indistinctly.

"Caroline."

His voice cut through the mist like a fine steel blade.

"Ape you never so well the manners of a lady, you will always have the soul of a whore."

XVI

"Infamous!" cried Cecily. It was her instinctive reaction.

Caroline twisted her handkerchief, damp with tears that had ceased to flow. She was tired. She was tired in the very marrow of her bones. "You don't understand, Cessy. I goaded him into it."

"I don't care." Cecily's pink mouth set stubbornly. "He should have dealt with you more respectfully. He knows you are not what you were. And there can be no excuse for saying what he said."

"Not even if it's true?"

"No excuse," repeated Cecily. "And it is not true. You are dreadfully overset, or you would never think such a thing."

"But it is true. I am a whore. I don't know why I ever tried to be anything else. It's my nature. Ask Victor Abingdon."

"Abingdon?" Cecily's tone was suspiciously mild. "Mark's friend Abingdon?"

Caroline nodded. She put her head defiantly on one side. "Two weeks ago I ran off from a party with him. We got drunk together and spent the night in an alehouse in Soho."

Bending over her pettipoint to conceal the shock she knew was in her face, Cecily remarked, "They say Victor Abingdon could seduce his own grandmother."

"He didn't seduce me. He was gracious enough to behave as if it was all his fault—he even begged pardon—but it wasn't that way at all. We had a rollicking good roll

in the hay, plain and simple. I was as hot for it as he was and enjoyed it not one whit less."

"But you are ashamed of it and would not let it happen again."

"I don't know about that," said Caroline.

"Well, my dear, when it comes right down to the honest truth, I can't say I don't enjoy a rollicking good roll in the hay myself." She choked a little over the terminology, but the thought was there.

Caroline gaped at her and then burst out laughing. "Cecily, you are the dearest creature in the world! I thank God I had you to come to. If I had not, I should be in Abingdon's arms this very minute." Her expression sobered. "I may end up there yet, but at least I shall have given the matter due consideration."

Cecily stirred her tea. "I thought we were discussing your quarrel with Geoffry."

"No," rejoined Caroline, squirming slightly in her chair. "That was just the point of departure. What we are discussing is: where shall I go from here? The devil of it, you see, is Georgie. For myself, I could do very well as Abingdon's woman for a time, and then somebody else's, and so on. I could get pretty rich, and I daresay sooner or later I could cozen somebody into marrying me. But that puts Georgie in rather a spot. Whereas, if I married Johnny Horton, I could settle down to a life of respectability, a little deadly, maybe, but respectability all the same. Georgie would have a decent future, and I . . . I might even have some . . . children. Why not? And . . . and. . . ."

Abruptly overcome, Caroline pressed her fingers to her temples in an attempt to quell the new-gathering storm of tears.

"I think we should discuss the quarrel with Geoffry," said Cecily. She selected a new shade of silk for the next flower.

"No!" shrieked Caroline. "Please, *please* don't make me talk about him! Oh, God, I shall die!" Succumbing, she fell weakly back in her chair and began to cry with heart-rending abandon. Cecily made a fairly convincing show of going on with her needlepoint.

"Carrie, my dear child, can it be that you did not *know* what you felt for him?"

"I didn't," sobbed Caroline. "I truly didn't realize it was still there. But when he said, 'Remember how it was,' I remembered everything. I remembered the shock and the dismay; I remembered the bitter misery and the searing, wrenching pain, and the dull, relentless agony when I left him. I couldn't. I just couldn't go back to it all again. I don't want to be his mistress; I want to be his wife. I want to meet his family, have a wedding like yours, in a church. I want to manage his household, entertain his business partners, bear his children. I might as well wish for the moon. But I'll never go back to him on the old terms." No longer in tears, she sighed wearily and passed a hand over her eyes.

"Cessy, do you think Georgia might move in with you for a bit?"

"No," said Cecily flatly, guessing she was thinking of Abingdon.

There was a careless bang on the door, and before anyone could answer Mark came in, whistling cheerfully.

"Good evening, darlings. Oh, God," he added, with a changed expression. "Hysterical females. Excuse *me*!"

He was detained from backing hastily out of the door by a cry from Cecily. "Coward!"

"Not at all, not at all. Must dress for dinner."

"Mark, we need you."

"We do not," said Caroline.

"In that case, I'd be delighted," said Mark and sat down. "First of all, claret all round. Tea is useless, quite

useless in these sorts of cases. Now, what is it? Stock market plummeted since I left? Boney resuscitated? Civil war? Earth on a collision course with the moon?''

''Darling, don't be facetious, please. It's serious. Caroline has only just realized she's been in love with Jolly all along.''

Nodding wisely, Mark said, ''Now *that* is a catastrophe.''

''I hate you,'' said Caroline.

''And welcome, my love. Just be good enough to weep over the hyacinths; they could do with a little water.''

''I *hate* you!''

''That's the spirit. Now tell me, sweetheart, what damn fool thing have you done?'' Mark warily allowed a trace of sympathy to creep into his face. When no renewed spate of tears seemed to be forthcoming, he let in a little more.

''Oh, it's no use, Mark. Forget it. Tell me, does Mr. Abingdon have as much money as he seems to?''

''More. Rolling in the stuff.'' He scrutinized her expressionlessly, until her eyes fell. ''You've gone and done it, haven't you? To Price. That revenge of yours. No, I don't want the grisly details. You gave it to the poor bastard, socko, right in the masculine pride. True?''

''True.''

''There's only one place that hurts worse than that, and, knowing you, I'd say you probably got him there, too, all in one blow. Yes?''

Caroline nodded.

Mark slapped his thigh. ''By God, Caroline, you are a hazard of nature! Do you know what the Abbot says about you?''

Caroline had never heard this sobriquet before. She had no idea what it might signify, but she knew to whom it must refer. She raised her chin. ''You mean Abingdon? What does he say?''

"Nothing." Mark shook his head in amazement. "Everybody knows you left Mrs. Marchbanks's drum with him, but nobody can get so much as a lifted eyebrow out of him on the subject. And now you've made Price dance to your tune when I'd have laid my last shilling he wouldn't give you the time of day by royal command."

"Well, after today he won't, so your last shilling is safe. God, I am so stupid! At the beginning I might have. . . Oh, what's the use?"

The three of them sipped their wine in silence for a few minutes. Mark rang to have the tea things taken away and refilled the wineglasses.

"Does Price know you're in love with him?" he asked when the maid had gone. "Did you tell him?"

Caroline stared. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I tried to tell him once, but he wouldn't listen. Said you were no more in love than he was, which of course was quite true, since he was perfectly besotted himself. Didn't like it, though. Couldn't admit to himself he'd lost his heart to a demirep. If he'd only faced up to it, I think he'd have been more than willing to make an honest woman of you. Got a romantic streak a mile wide, our Geoffry." Mark turned to his wife. "Did you notice, he cried at our wedding? Real tears. I was never so surprised in my life."

Caroline was looking at him with the most enormous eyes he had ever seen.

"Really," Mark assured her. "Of course, I was pretty near tears myself. It was a lovely wedding."

"You really think he loved me?" whispered Caroline.

"Oh, that. Of course he did. Plain as a pikestaff. Of course, it was a long time ago, and these things don't live forever, especially under truly adverse conditions."

Mark drained off his wine. Caroline's face was a study in despair.

"Cessy," said Mark gently, "tell the poor lady what to do."

"Do?" echoed Cecily. "I'm afraid I really don't have the faintest—"

"Just tell her what you would do yourself in a similar situation."

"A similar. . . . Well, I can hardly imagine." She took a few more thoughtful stitches. "Mark, Geoffry behaved execrably, and I think—"

"I don't care about that. Just tell us what you would do."

"In Caroline's place . . . Carrie, I'm sorry, but I do think you behaved badly as well. You certainly must apologize."

Mark saluted his wife. "If you want to know what a lady would do, just ask one. And the lady says, apologize."

"He won't see me," said Caroline. "Not a chance of it."

"Great heaven, not in person," put in Cecily. "By letter."

"He'll chuck it in the fire."

"Oh, no," said Mark. "I should; you would; most people would. But Price is of a different stamp. He will feel duty bound to reply, one way or another."

"He should apologize as well," insisted Cecily fair-mindedly.

"I promise I'll suggest it, should he ask my opinion," Mark assured her.

"*I* never asked your opinion," observed Caroline.

Mark gave her a self-effacing smile. "It was the least I could do, in return for your kind attention to the hyacinths."

Home again and shut up tight in her room, Caroline

contemplated the idea of writing a letter of apology. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like a perfectly futile exercise in by-the-book etiquette. Even if Geoffry didn't toss the letter into the fire, as Caroline was still sure he would, the most she could hope for would be a punctiliously worded rejection and probably a formal conclusion to all communications. But still, she told herself, if Cecily said the right thing to do was apologize, then apologize she would. She thought of Captain Tilsitt's apology and almost smiled. Geoffry was making quite a collection.

Sitting down at her delicate little writing desk, she took out a fresh quill, sharpened it slowly, and then wrote out, with almost no hesitation, the following text:

Dear Mr. Price:

With regard to the Shameful Scene in which you were this afternoon an involuntary participant, I beg you will accept my very humble Apologies. There is nothing I can offer in the way of justification for my behavior. What little explanation I can give is no less Shameful than the Scene itself, but I feel you are entitled to it. My conduct was based on a desire to revenge myself upon you for what I considered to be the Humiliations I suffered at your hands last Autumn. My sense of Grievance was due, I now think, to an excessive sensibility on my part, but even if my injuries were as great as I once believed them to be, this circumstance would in no way mitigate the Disgracefulness of my own comportment, for which I am now most Deeply and Sincerely Sorry.

I am, sir, &c.,
Caroline

Her pen hovered for a moment more over the paper. Twice she started to write something after her name; both

times she stopped without making a mark. Finally she put a small horizontal line under the word and left it.

With a sense of just having accomplished a herculean labor, she blotted the letter and started to seal it with a wafer. Then, changing her mind, she left it folded on her desk for reconsideration in the morning. She called Georgia up and asked her to bid Mrs. Ford and Alice goodnight for her. Pleading indisposition, she refused supper and went to bed.

At first when she woke up she could not identify the heavy, oppressive feeling that seemed to weigh on her chest, pushing her back toward oblivion. Waking more fully, she remembered. She was still in love with Geoffry, and she had made him hate her. How, she wondered, could she force herself to get out of bed, and, moreover, why should she take the trouble? Unable to come up with a satisfactory answer, she nevertheless came to the conclusion that it was unbearable to lie about indulging in dismal reflections and so got up. She washed, dressed, and did her hair. She gave her letter a cursory glance, decided it was utterly impossible and should be completely revised. Then she sealed it and took it downstairs to send, because she knew she could never write anything better.

At breakfast, Mrs. Ford scolded her good-naturedly for not eating and discoursed for some time on the restorative powers of fresh milk and porridge. Caroline thought if she had to put one spoonful of porridge into her mouth she would vomit. Georgia sat very quiet and watched her with big, anxious eyes. Partly to deflect those anxious eyes and partly to get away from Mrs. Ford's cheerful insensitivity, Caroline suggested a ride, and by twelve o'clock she and Georgia were trotting comfortably along Rotten Row. They stopped to watch some little boys sailing boats on the Serpentine, and again to observe a young mother duck bustling across the roadway with her trail of unsteady

ducklings. Having brought with them a basket of cold chicken and a loaf of bread, they tethered their horses to a tree near the Round Pond and made a pleasant picnic in the May sunshine. Georgia chattered and laughed and told stories with heroic dedication, so that only once in the whole course of the afternoon did Caroline feel traitorous tears well up and spill down her cheeks. Fiercely wondering what it was all about and what it had to do with that letter to Mr. Price, Georgia looked tactfully away while Caroline dried her eyes. Then they had a good gallop and headed for home.

On the way, Caroline reminded herself that there could not possibly be a reply to her letter, because Geoffry would only now be arriving at his lodgings to receive it. She turned her thoughts to other things, dressed for dinner and the theater, and was caught completely off her guard when Alice came to tell her that Mr. Scofield was downstairs. She went so pale that Alice ran for the smelling salts, but Caroline soon convinced her that it would be all right. She pinched her cheeks to get some color back into them and went down to see Scofield with a pounding in her ears that made her feel quite giddy.

Scofield took one look at her and suppressed the verbal part of his message. He substituted an observation of his own.

"Ma'am, Mr. Price is very, very sorry," he said quietly.

He put into her hand her own letter of apology, unopened. With a low bow he turned away, and in a moment he was gone.

"Thank you, Scofield," said Caroline to the empty air.

Oblivious to Alice's perplexed stare and Mrs. Ford's chirping inquiries from the parlor, Caroline went upstairs to her room and, to Georgia's helpless distress, once more locked herself in. Some time later, she went downstairs

again, and though she did cry off from her theater engagement, she had supper and played cards for a while.

Before going to bed, she opened her writing desk again and took out another piece of stationery. This time, with a glint in her eye, she sprinkled it liberally with scent and as she waved it in the air to dry, her look of concentration made it clear she was composing. It took longer to think through than to write, for the message consisted of only one line.

"Dear Unicorn," it said, "The business is finished."

It seemed that this letter was to meet with no more gratifying response than the other, for a day passed and then another and another. Caroline found that one could, after all, survive on sheer reflex, if only one had the will power to observe the conventions. She forced herself to rise at a reasonable hour, eat breakfast for the sake of Mrs. Ford, smile and talk for Georgia's sake. Cecily, coming to call a day or two later, was surprised and relieved to find that the fiasco of the apology had been accepted in an apparently calm, philosophical spirit.

"I can't understand it," she fretted. "It isn't as though he had no reason to reproach himself. Then, perhaps, and only perhaps, he might have a right to put himself on this high horse. But he did deserve a setdown. And no matter how angry he is, he must know that he has behaved very shabbily. Of course, Carrie, you might have met with a more rational response if you had waited a few days. I never dreamed you'd go home and send your letter off straight away."

"My dear love," said Caroline, "a wound heals faster if it is cleanly bandaged and left alone than if it is poked and pried at continually. I'm sure any doctor would say so."

Cecily's eyes filled with remorse. "Oh, my dear, I am

sorry! You're right, I know," she said, and they discussed it no more.

It was very nearly a week later when Caroline was called away from tea one afternoon by an extremely polite and agreeable man in a dark coat and the knee breeches that proclaimed him either a very old-fashioned fellow or a servant. Once he had ascertained that he was speaking to Miss Dancer in person, he handed her a letter written on milk-white paper, bordered in gold, and sealed with a signet.

My dear Caroline:

Words cannot express the pleasure with which I discovered your note this afternoon upon my return to Town. I am in a fever of impatience to see you as soon as may be. Would it be too much to hope that you will sup with me tonight, at ten, or at whatever time you may be freed from other engagements? I beg you will signify your response to Jim, the bearer of this hasty *barbouillage*; and pity the poor devil if you instruct him to disappoint me!

Dare I yet sign myself

Victor?

Caroline's brilliant blue eyes were inscrutable as they rose from the page to fasten themselves on those of the imposing manservant with the improbably homely name of Jim.

"You may tell your employer that I am happy to accept his kind invitation."

The manservant bowed. He said in a gravelly, deep voice, "A carriage will call for you at the specified hour, madam. Have you any further instructions?"

Caroline indicated that she had not, nodded in dismissal, and saw him out.

"A supper invitation," she told Mrs. Ford.

"Not for tonight, my dear? You aren't thinking of accepting an invitation at such short notice?"

"It isn't really short notice; it was postponed from another time. Besides, I already have accepted." she smiled. "I shall want a bath and some help with my dress, Georgie."

Georgia speedily volunteered her services.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Ford, "I don't know but what it will do you good to go out, after stopping at home all week. But I must say modern manners are a bit too free and easy to please me quite."

"Oh, well, by the time one reaches my age, one has learned to be a bit independent, I think."

"I suppose that's true," observed Mrs. Ford comfortably. "You're hardly a schoolgirl, after all."

Caroline had just over four hours to prepare herself for her supper engagement, and she used every minute to advantage. She bathed long and luxuriously, washing her hair and then soaking in a liberal solution of bath salts. Afterward, as she sat by a fire kindled to dry her golden tresses, she shaped and buffed her nails on fingers and toes, pumiced her feet and elbows, and slathered her skin with softening lotions, rubbing them in until every square inch was finely toned and smooth as satin. She trimmed the ends of her hair and made sure her eyebrows were in no need of neatening. She curled her eyelashes and applied some brown mascara. Feeling that she wished to look rather sophisticated, she added a well-blended blush to her cheeks and deepened the color of her lips. Her hair, unruly now but soft and shining like the sunlight, she twisted into loose ropes which she bundled almost carelessly onto the top of her head and fastened with as few pins as possible. Then, and only then, did she slip into her clothes: shift, stays, a minimum of petticoats, and finally a dress of pale blue silk, crisp and cool.

"It must be a very special supper," remarked Georgia.

"Oh, well, it's rather fun to make a fuss now and then, don't you think?" hedged Caroline.

"Is it a rich man you're going to sup with?"

Caroline laughed. "Oh, yes. Very rich and very important."

"As rich as the man who tried to give you the diamond bracelet?"

Caroline tried to keep her face natural. "Just about that rich, I should say. Maybe a little more, maybe a little less. I don't really know. Run, now, will you, and see if it's ten o'clock yet."

It was, and the man named Jim appeared forthwith. He escorted her smoothly into an elegant black carriage devoid of ornament. He told her that she would find a wrap on the seat opposite, which she might put on if she wished not to expose herself to the night air. Then he climbed up onto the box next to the coachman.

The wrap, Caroline discovered, was a black satin domino, furnished with a capacious hood, which would effectively conceal any sort or shape of person. Rather whimsically, she put it on as the coach moved along Oxford Street, avoiding the late traffic of Shaftesbury Avenue and Piccadilly, cutting down Regent Street, across to Berkeley Square and into Curzon Street. Alighting, she had little time to observe the unexceptional stone facade of the house before she found herself in a high, square hallway lit by a large number of candles in silver sconces. She shed her domino, feeling rather like a character in a play, and followed Jim up a graceful flight of stairs. He led her to a door, which he opened for her and then, bowing, closed behind her. She could not hear his retreating footsteps in the thickly carpeted hall.

Enchanted as well as amused by the elaborate romance

of her introduction into the house, Caroline glanced about her. She was in a sumptuous Georgian sitting room, all warm mahogany and gleaming satinwood, with a red-and-blue Turkish carpet on the floor and red damask draperies pulled across what looked to be French doors, perhaps opening onto a balcony. There was a tiny table set with exquisite china and cut-crystal glasses that cast rainbows on the snowy tablecloth from the light of the candles on the walls. Tall silver candlesticks on the table held candles which had not yet been lighted. Against a wall not far from the table was a red velvet couch with several small satin cushions.

Caroline had barely taken all this in when a door opened in a far wall and her host appeared. He was across the room in an instant, taking both her hands in his and bringing them fervently to his lips.

"My dearest life!" he murmured.

Staggered by his appearance, Caroline just stared at him.

Straightening up, he looked her over. "My golden beauty! Oh, but surely in a case like this a warmer greeting is not uncalled for."

So saying, he took her in his arms and kissed her avidly on the mouth.

She was not his dearest life, and she knew it, but even if she was persuaded his peace of mind would not have suffered in the least if she had never written him at all, it was still exhilarating to be treated as if she were the single most important thing in the world. She clung to him and returned his kiss with enthusiasm.

"Oh, my darling, I had almost despaired of you," he told her.

"God forbid," she said. "You'd have been obliged to change your name."

He laughed and released her, crossing the room to pour madeira into two of the prismic crystal glasses. Caroline eyed him curiously.

"Is that why they call you the Abbot?" she asked, gesticulating at his dress.

He wore something which looked very much like the habit of a Franciscan monk: a cowled brown robe, fastened round the waist by a length of rope. The rope was made of twisted gold thread, and white shirt ruffles could be seen at his throat and wrists, while conventional trousers and shoes were visible below the hem of the robe. But despite these modifications, the total effect was incongruously monastic.

"In a sense," he said in reply to Caroline's question. "Have you ever heard of the Medmenham monks, my dear child?"

It was obvious he expected her to say no, but as a matter of fact she had. "A disreputable fraternity, as I recall, founded by Sir Francis Dashwood in the last century, and dedicated to . . . everything the traditional orders are not."

"Such as—?"

"Indiscipline, intemperence, incontinence. . . ."

Abingdon's brow furrowed thoughtfully. "Walpole?" he asked.

Caroline nodded.

"You are full of surprises, my sweet. I should not have judged you the sort of female to pore over memoirs."

"As you say, I am full of surprises, sir, or should I say, Father?"

"Saucebox!" he cried, laughing. "Do you wish to know the rest of the story or not?"

"To be sure, I do," she replied. "For if you were a Medmenhamite you must be near eighty years old, and I

should be very interested to know how you have achieved the extraordinary preservation of your youth.''

''My prime, darling. When a man is past thirty—thirty-five, but let's say thirty—he can no longer lay claim to youth. Say, the preservation of my prime.'' Refilling her glass, he paused. ''Ah, God, you are beautiful, Caroline. More beautiful than I have ever seen you. You lack only one thing for perfection.''

She questioned him with her eyes.

''My diamonds. Will you wear them now?''

She nodded.

Disappearing into the next room, he came back with the familiar velvet box and another large single stone mounted as a cravat pin. He put the bracelet on her arm and the pin in her hair, for the time being. He promised her a pair of hair clips in the near future.

''Are you hungry?'' he asked, his fingers brushing her lips.

Caroline considered. Yes, she was. He gave three short pulls on the bell and informed her that supper would be served in a quarter of an hour. Behind the red draperies there proved to be, as Caroline had guessed, a balcony. They retired there to finish their madeira, overlooking a small courtyard which, Abingdon said, led directly into the street through a small door which could be opened only from the inside. There were wrought-iron steps leading from the balcony to the ground.

''What *is* the rest of the Medmenham story?'' Caroline inquired, as she leaned against the railing and contemplated the robed form opposite her.

''Ah, yes. It was some years ago, ten, maybe twelve. We were young and mad. Of course we had heard of Sir Francis's fraternity; some of us had scandalous ancestors who had belonged to it. When George Byron proposed a

resurrection of the society, we thought it a capital notion—about half a dozen of us. And as a matter of fact it was good fun for a bit. I keep my habit *in memoriam*."

"You gave it up?"

"Gave it up?" He laughed. "Somebody gave *us* up! Caused the very devil of a scandal, and we were ostracized from decent society for quite some weeks. Such a dust! Byron, of course, learned no lesson from it and went on his merry way until society was obliged to give *him* up. Which I suppose is fine, if one prefers revolting Greeks. Personally, I prefer society, revolting though it may sometimes be."

"Oh," said Caroline, rather awed. "You mean *that* Byron."

"My sweet life, thank God that Byron is the only Byron there is!"

With a sardonic grin, the Abbot led his lady back indoors, where the candles on the supper table were now lit, and most of the others had been extinguished. A serving table laden with covered silver dishes stood next to the small table where the places were laid, and the wine-glasses and soupbowls had been filled.

In the next hour, Caroline made her way through the most wonderful meal she had ever eaten. From the cold asparagus soup to the fresh strawberry jelly, everything was light and delicious, perfectly prepared, beautifully served up, and exquisitely complemented in the wines, of which there were several. All of the service was done by the attentive host. He put each portion on the plates, poured the wine, and cleared used dishes onto a lower shelf in the serving table.

Eventually, they sat face to face across an almost empty expanse of napery, the candles pushed to one side, and fed each other bits of hothouse fruit. Conversation languished as, delightfully drowsy, each one concentrated on select-

ing the choisest morsel of pear or peach or plum and insinuating it into the waiting mouth of the other. Soon there was as much kissing and sucking of fingers as consumption of fruit. Their legs intertwined under the table, and finally they leaned together across the little plates of debris and their lips met, wet, sweet with fruit juices and excitement.

"My lucious young lovely," murmured Abingdon, "now I am a unicorn in truth."

They both laughed and were kissing intently when there came a gingerly knock on the hall door. The langorous, sensuous look on the Abbot's face was transformed into one of utter amazement. When, after a breathless moment, the knock came again, he got up from the table. He walked to the door and opened it. He fixed the hapless intruder with a basilisk stare, which Caroline expected to turn him immediately into stone.

Jim blanched, but managed to stammer, "There . . . there is a gentleman below, sir, to see you. He . . . ah, here is his card, sir."

"You have taken leave of your senses," pronounced Abingdon. He prepared to close the door without further ado.

"Please, sir, I implore your pardon, sir, but this gentleman is most insistent. He was told that you were not available, sir, but he offers violence. He has threatened to call a constable if he is summarily evicted. Not, of course, sir, that a constable would find anything untoward in your household, but I daresay he would find it necessary to speak to you, in which case you would be disturbed anyway, sir, so I thought, sir—"

"Bash him over the head and lock him in the pantry till morning," Abingdon ordered and slammed the door in his major domo's apologetic face.

As he did so, he snatched the card and, purely out of

curiosity, read the name. With a look of disgust, he started to crumple the card, then, changing his mind, he excused himself to Caroline and left the room.

Left to her own devices, Caroline dreamily ate some more of a peach. She floated across to the door from which the Abbot had come at the beginning of the evening and looked inside. It was a bedchamber, not, as she would have imagined, some sort of chinoiserie extravaganza, but a gorgeously refined French room in royal blue and gilt. She danced over to the mirror and admired her reflection against the rich colors of the bed hangings. She wondered if it would amuse Abingdon to find her lying stark naked on the coverlet when he returned, and though she rather thought it would, she didn't think she could get out of her dress without help.

Never mind, she told herself. Another night.

She drifted back into the sitting room and stood by the balcony, looking out.

After a time, Abingdon came back. His expression was, Caroline thought vaguely, a bit odd.

"That business of yours, my darling," he said. "You told me it was finished?"

"It *is* finished," said Caroline.

"There's a rascally ruffian downstairs who doesn't seem to think so."

Closely watching her, he saw first incomprehension, then incredulity flash into her face, and she went dead pale.

"He says you love him and you've only come to me because he's driven you to. He says Mark was right, and he's been a fool. I don't know what that means, exactly, but I perceive you do. He wants to see you. Do you want to see him?"

"No!" screamed Caroline.

She came flying into his arms. "Don't let him come! Put him in the pantry, Victor!"

She began to kiss him wildly. "Victor, hold me, love me. Take me to bed. Now, Victor, please!"

"Of course, sweetheart," he told her. "Shh, now, gently. Quiet, my angel. No one is going to coerce you, I promise. We'll put him in the pantry if you like. I'll put him in the river if you like."

"Oh, no!" she cried. "Don't hurt him! He . . . I . . . I. . . ."

"You do love him, don't you, my beauty? I beg you, Caroline, do not wriggle against me like that. For once in my life I feel an impulse to do a generous thing, and here you are making it damned difficult. Now sit here," he said, pushing her onto the couch. "Let me get something. . . ."

He soaked a table napkin in the wine cooler and bathed her flaming cheeks and her forehead. "Dear heart," he said, "dear, frightened little bird, I want you very much, but I don't want you in desperation. Now, will you do this one thing for me? See this ruffian who is so anxious about you. Let me leave you alone with him for just fifteen minutes, no more than fifteen, word of honor. I'll stand by the clock. If, at the end of those fifteen minutes, you can send him away and receive me with a quiet heart, I shall be a very happy man. I'll take you to bed and you'll stay with me. We'll be lovers for a long time, and I shall make you as happy as I know how. Just do this one thing for me first. Will you do it?"

Caroline stared down at her clenched white hands. Their trembling made shimmering lights flash from the diamonds on her wrist. This time when she remembered how it had been with Geoffry she remembered not only the pain of loving him but the joy as well. She remembered

waking up to see his face on the pillow, a pale morning shadow on his chin. She remembered the way he would kiss her goodbye after breakfast, and the way he would greet her when he came home at night. She remembered how he used to relax over a glass, recounting anecdotes of the day, discussing plans and projects for the future. Then she remembered how those projects had always included herself, as a matter of course. Mark *had* been right all along.

Caroline shook her head bemusedly. How had he found her? He must have gone round to Galen Place and got information out of Georgia. She was sure Georgia had guessed where she was going tonight. Or perhaps Georgia, concerned, had gone after him; Georgia knew about the quarrel, too. Maybe there had been a little push from Mark somewhere along the line. Yes, it was very likely Mark had had something to do with it.

But all that was unimportant. What was important was that he had found her. He had cast aside his scruples and come after her. He had faced up to his feelings. Would he marry her, as Mark said? Maybe. Very likely. But even if he didn't, their relationship would never be on the old, painful terms.

"I'll see him, Victor," she said.

She smiled softly as she unfastened the diamond bracelet and the Abbot tried to make up his mind whether he was a damned fine fellow or a fool. He decided he was both.